

BRICKBATS AND JOLLIFICATION: MASKED COERCION, COLLUSIVE
POWER, AND RECIPROCAL PRODUCTIVITY IN AMERICAN VAUDEVILLE

A Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School
of Cornell University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

by

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August 2009

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Cornell University 2009

This project establishes the crucial role vaudeville played in the legal reforms, cultural evolution, and ideological development of American Progressivism. Spectators and vaudevillians frequently embraced and promulgated the image of vaudeville as an avowedly trivial performance genre, a reputation that has lingered in crippling fashion. I employ performance reviews, records of corporate censorship, and previously unexamined protected material files, however, to demonstrate that vaudeville helped further the concerns toward social justice and economic betterment that lay at the root of American Progressivism. Beginning with vaudeville's troubling of cultural hierarchy, this work finds vaudeville as a key agent in the creation of a highly variegated taste culture, one that frustrates the usual demarcations between the offerings of "sacred" and "popular" cultures. I argue that the performers used this admixture to critique the economic oppression symbolically enacted through ossified sacred cultural offerings. Additionally, this project focuses on the productive capacity displayed in the reciprocal relationship of live performance. Prior to the adoption of a cinematic mode of spectatorship in the consumption of variety theatre, I find, vaudeville audiences evinced a high degree of productivity during the performance. I trace the decline of this spectatorial power occasioned by the introduction of stand-alone cinema acts and turns that combined live performance with cinema.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Patrick Robert Kilby Reynolds was born in Salem, Oregon in 1970. In 1992 he graduated from Linfield College in McMinnville, Oregon with a Bachelor of Arts in Theatre Arts. During his time at Linfield, he acted in, directed, and designed several productions. He was named Best Supporting Actor by the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts/American College Theatre Festival in 1991 for his performance in *The Jeremiah*. His senior thesis was “Orson Welles as Theatrical *Auteur*: The Mercury Theatre’s *Julius Caesar* (1937).” Following graduation, he acted professionally before beginning graduate study at Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island. He graduated from Brown with a Master of Arts in Theatre Studies in 1994. His cumulative project at Brown, completed under the direction of Don B. Wilmeth, was “Generic Dissolution in Guarini’s *Il Pastor Fido*.” During his study at Brown he began his scholarly work on American vaudeville. He continued this work at Cornell University, where he studied theatre history in the Theatre Studies graduate program. During leave from graduate work at Cornell, he acted professionally, served as an Acting/Directing Fellow with the Cornell Interactive Theatre Ensemble, and was the directing mentor for Ordinary People, a justice theatre collective. Subsequently, he was Acting Chair and Visiting Assistant Professor at Eastern Mennonite University in Harrisonburg, Virginia.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Scores of librarian, archivists, and research staff members have made this project possible. In particular, I am indebted to those folks at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center at the University of Texas, Austin; the Harvard Theatre Library at Harvard University; the University of Iowa's Art Library; the New York Public Library; the Library of Congress; and the University of Southern California. Don B. Wilmeth, who worked tirelessly to promote serious inquiry into American popular entertainments during his several decades in the Brown University theatre program, first sparked my interest in vaudeville through his loving rigor in coursework and private discussion. J. Ellen Gainor read countless drafts of seemingly endless chapters with an incredibly discerning eye. Her catholic scholarly interests—spanning ballet, Shaw, and Greenwich Village culture—have often challenged this project beyond my own skills. I am fortunate to have had her as my adviser. David Bathrick and R. Laurence Moore also contributed their keen minds to many questions raised in the chapters that follow. I am grateful to have had the opportunity to benefit from the gentle probing and profound decency of the late Joel Porte. A renowned scholar, he was a better man. My own family, particularly my mother and father, have been of invaluable support during the research and writing of this dissertation. I would also be remiss if I did not acknowledge the support of St. Luke's Lutheran Church, Pastor Rick Bair, David Feldshuh, Marie Morris, Eastern Mennonite University, Heidi Winters Vogel, David Vogel, Phil Grayson, Erin West, Bruce Levitt, Martha Dewey, Annie Frazer, the Telluride Association, Michelle Milne, Jane Barnette, Dave Robertson, Larissa Kokernot, Debbie Hansen, Sharon Tregaskis, and Jerry Holsopple. Finally, not a page would have been written without the friendship and advice of Richard Canedo, who has forgotten more about vaudeville than E.F. Albee ever knew.

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PREFACE

Finding that Noah Webster was not “as well posted on things theatrical as he was on most every other subject,” Will Cressy, noted vaudeville actor and sketch author, suggested the lexicographer missed a vital vaudeville phrase: “putting it over.” This ability to instantaneously “cause an audience to see, understand, comprehend, and appreciate the intention and meaning” of even the briefest jot of performance, Cressy held, “is an absolute necessity in vaudeville. . . . If [a performer] does not possess this quality, the probabilities are that he will never get into vaudeville. And if he does, he will get out much quicker than he got in.” The veteran performer conceptualizes the skill of putting a moment over as the sole characteristic that binds otherwise disparate acts together, the element that joins juggling dogs and Shakespearean monologists under the mantle of American vaudeville performance. During an era riven along fault lines of gender, class, race, and ethnicity, vaudeville’s prizing of putting it over also flowers as an embrace of the most egalitarian of stage connections. “There is not a nationality in the world” absent from the vaudeville stage, Cressy holds, further noting that “vaudeville entertainers of to-day come from every class.” Moreover, his ability of instantaneous and successful self-commodification functions for Cressy as a characteristic almost wholly lodged within the performer, divorced from any consideration of the appeal or quality of the material. Indeed, the worst material, he argues, “cannot hold [the vaudevillian] back.”¹

Cressy’s argument contains three strains of approaching the cultural and artistic phenomenon that was vaudeville, each of which has, in its fashion, limited a

¹ Will M. Cressy, “Putting it Over,” *Selected Vaudeville Criticism*, ed. Anthony Slide (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 1988) 218-322.

nuanced appreciation of the genre's force and importance. The foundation of vaudeville's success, to follow the lines of Cressy's formulation, was almost entirely due to the performer's ability to engage the audience through sheer dint of personality. Beggared by the passing decades, the ephemera of such a connection fades beyond the fumbling grasp of the historian into the fossilized ether of memoirs and tantalizingly suggestive newspaper reviews. Taking into account vaudeville's massive economic and cultural presence from the late 1880s through the early 1920s, it would be fair to say that historians agree less about vaudeville in performance than about any other genre of American live performance, a stunning fact for a theatre whose heyday intersected with the high point of American reportage and the birth of cinema and radio.

Yet Cressy also helps promulgate an image of vaudeville in which what Mikhail Bakhtin would term the content-aspect of the various pieces were of little import. If even the worst material could be put over successfully by a skilled vaudevillian, notable performances become suspect in regard to their literary excellence, socio-critical acuity, or performance expertise. While celebrating Charlie Chaplin's unerring dissections of classism and trumpeting Ida Tarbell's faithful rendering of the modern life, such critics neatly fence in the era's most popular entertainment as a mere palliative to the otherwise harried Progressive Era mind.

Finally, Cressy highlights one's ability to put over an act as essential to retaining employment. His understandable absorption with finding work as a performer should not be surprising in a medium that often hired employees by the week. Much of the surviving personal and corporate records echo time and again this fixation on the economics of the genre. Vaudeville, partly defined by its adoption and refinement of a corporate structure and its life-long embroilment in labor discord, made no claim to eschewing box office concerns for the greater good of art. Yet

neither were all decisions driven by an unquenchable desire for profit or employment. Time and again vaudeville's corporate overlords and migrant laborers compromised their ability to generate revenue out of a real or imagined service to their art, society, or treasured audience.

Until quite recently the study of vaudeville has found itself crippled by obeisance to this absorption with personality, frothiness, and salary. In truth, the form that tolerated few rubrics during its existence chafes under them in remembrance. After all, vaudeville, in its time (c. 1881-1932), the single most popular form of American entertainment, played to an audience as diverse and difficult to pigeonhole as the nation itself. At the dawn of the twentieth-century one out of every two theater tickets sold in the United States provided entrance to a vaudeville show.² Its relatively low price and aura of respectability encouraged attendance from across the breadth of American classes. Beside churches, vaudeville also provided the chief gathering place that enfolded women, men, and children within a single environment. Though segregated by section of the auditorium, most big-time theatres embraced audience members of every race and ethnicity and demanded that performers hold their attention. Its stages held politicians, magicians, baseball players, jugglers, African explorers, operatic contraltos, musical pigs, and harp soloists. At some houses performances began right after breakfast and finished as the last streetcar lumbered through the darkened midnight street. If anything, its sheer complexity and diversity would seem to have inured it from the ossification historians so often visit upon their subjects.

The distinctions among “variety” (c. 1860s-c. 1880s), “vaudeville (c.1881-c.1932), and “variety theatre” are crucial but problematic.³ The term “variety” can be

² John DiMeglio, *Vaudeville, U.S.A.* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1973) 11-12.

³ For example of a complete variety bill please see Appendix A.

confusing when addressing the breadth of American popular theatricals. In a definitional sense, any theatre that presents several distinct performances in an evening's entertainment is variety. Yet even though mid-nineteenth century melodrama, by virtue of having other acts as adjuncts to the central play, could properly be referred to as being "variety theatre", using the term in this way fails to preserve important distinctions between performances centered around a prominent piece (e.g., *Uncle Tom's Cabin*) and those existing as a sequence of more or less equal acts. I therefore distinguish between 1) variety; 2) vaudeville; and 3) variety theatre, a category that includes all popular multi-act entertainments arranged sequentially on a bill (e.g., variety, vaudeville, burlesque, etc.).

Variety refers to a generically distinct predecessor of vaudeville that distinguished itself from its successor largely by era, operations, comportment, and audience. Variety found its greatest success beginning with the Civil War and lasting until the early 1880s. A contemporary of melodrama, it grew out of the decades following the nation's *Metamora* induced rush toward a decidedly non-European theatrical identity.⁴ As such, it remained one of the most authentically native forms of popular entertainment, finding voice in a host of national types (e.g., the Yankee) that were quite distinct from other popular theatre stock characters. Perhaps because of this provenance and its maturation in Northern cities during the Civil War, variety also grew up as the unabashedly jingoistic stepchild of the dime museum and lecture hall.

Though itinerant performers certainly had their place during variety's heyday, some variety theatres maintained a stock company of consistently appearing local performers. These variety actors were hired for their ability to play broadly across the

⁴ *Metamora; or The Last of the Wampanoags* (1829) by John Augustus Stone won Edwin Forrest's first competition for native-written American drama. Playing the eponymous emblem of a "savage race—hated of all men, unblessed by heaven," Forrest went on to give an immensely popular performance, propelling the play to the forefront of the waxing Jacksonian theatre.

hodge-podge “canon” of variety, rather than for their excellence in but one area of performance (as would be the case in vaudeville). Some evenings, the audience would see the same performer play two or three times in a lengthy playlet; the performer might appear several more times during the night, though many acts would place him well outside his comfort zone. (A clog dancer, for example, might be called to fill in as harmony on a comic vocal duet.) Because of this, variety performers were prized for a unique combination of versatility and focus: the theatre needed her to appear in several acts during the night, but also required specialists in any one of the given lines that would be a point of focus during a single turn.

Variety also founded itself upon the single proprietor model. Tony Pastor, to name the most famous and influential of the variety managers, ran a number of variety houses in sequence in the 1860s and 1870s. Never, however, did Pastor take on the responsibility for a second house. Managing a theatre organization of the complexity of the variety house by oneself simply precluded thoughts of empire. (This was particularly true of Pastor, who continued to write sketches and songs, and appear in shows until shortly before his death.)

Most importantly, variety had a probably well-deserved reputation for providing a smoke-choked, alcohol-ridden environment in which many Victorian women were expected to be uncomfortable; despite attempts at a mixed-gender audience throughout the 1870s, men constituted almost the entirety of variety’s audience. Though it was not at the base level of the concert salon of the 1850s—little more than a glorified tavern with sometimes quite suggestive fare—the variety hall was a bastion of aggressive masculinity. As well, for a series of complex reasons involving urban geography, public transportation, neighborhood character, and social class consolidation, its halls were largely filled by members of the working class. This

crowd had held on to an interactive style of viewership that made many uncomfortable in the days of darkened auditoriums and plush seats.

Conversely, mature vaudeville (early 1890s-late 1920s), while maintaining play in many individual houses, made great use of circuits. These large (often regional, infrequently national) chains of allied theatres might sometimes have the same owner but would, by definition, share bookings of acts, as well as help monitor performers' behavior when on the road. The presence of circuits and the development of centralized booking standardized much of the formerly haphazard business operations in variety and early vaudeville. Performers now had their agency's money subtracted directly from their salary. Contracts could run as long as two years, eliminating the performer's concern over securing work and the theatres' stress that the vaudevillian might have booked multiple engagements for the same week.

Most importantly, the development of circuits transformed vaudeville from a local or regional assembly of competing managers, each running his own theatre, into one of the premiere entertainment trusts in the history of American performance. At the height of his control, circuit manager Edward F. Albee, adoptive grandfather of the playwright, could send shock waves through the nation's vaudeville houses by simply instituting a new performance policy or expressing his disinclination to book a certain type of act. Even those theatres not under his control would have to respond to any large change Albee instituted in his own houses.

Circuits therefore effectively functioned as corporate centers of control for the sprawling new entertainment, mirroring other trusts such as Standard Oil or U.S. Steel. Because the larger circuits controlled not only theatres in most of the large urban centers but also the smaller houses in between, they were able to mandate terms to an actor. Booking control of theatres all along the railroad travel corridors granted the vaudeville magnate, safely ensconced in the circuit's headquarters, control of the

performer's ability to make "jumps" (i.e., get from the city of the first performance to the city of the next week's engagement).

The daily operations of each theatre, be it operating as a single proprietorship or as part of a circuit, was directly overseen by a manager. Some of the manager's duties were not much different than his counterpart's in the legitimate houses. He oversaw and monitored the box office, arranged for publicity in the local papers, supervised various theatre staff (e.g., ushers, film projectionists), and saw that the physical environment of the theatre itself was kept in good repair. The most important managerial skill, however, demanded a bit of art peculiar to vaudeville. Having received a group of vaudevillians on Monday morning for that week's performances, the manager carefully constructed a bill (ordering of acts to constitute a full performance) of turns (the appearance of an act). As vaudeville matured and grew into a genre rich with its own traditions the strategies for laying out this order of turns became fairly regularized between houses. The headliner (most important act) would always play in the penultimate spot, for example, while an act featuring a great deal of visual flash but little dialogue (e.g., acrobats) opened the show, allowing audience members time to find their seats without struggling to hear lines or distracting other patrons from important narrative developments. A sample bill from 1902, accompanied by the manager's comments, provides a clear example of this structure:

1. The Geller Troupe. "A man, a woman and a child who do posing on the revolving nature stage. They reproduce famous pieces of statuary. This act is an artistic novelty that goes immensely with the audience."
2. Raymond and Caverly. German comedians
3. James J. Corbett, boxer. "In stories of his travels. He has improved 100 percent as an entertainer. He is no longer a wax curiosity on account of his pugilistic reputation. He is an entertainer who entertains any refined way."

4. The Three Meers. European comedy wire performers. "The climax of their act is when they begin walking on the wire while running that same wire at a high-speed with a bicycle apparatus, so the wire walker is running along a moving wire as someone reels.
5. Madame Eugenia Mantelli. "Grand opera prima Donna. A splendid voice and beautifully trained. She made an emphatic hit at both performances yesterday."
6. Ed. F. Reynard. Ventriloquist.
7. Howard's Comedy Ponies.⁵

It was as the week wore on and the regular audience got a good look at the acts that the manager best demonstrated his showmanship and vaudeville acumen. An act booked to be a comedy bust-up, for example, might fall flat during the Monday matinee. Expecting he would now need a stronger lead-in to intermission, the manager might drop the comedians from the favored slot and try out something unorthodox (e.g., a mule act) in an effort to satisfy the needs of the show. Eventually, the manager would arrive at an order that raised and lowered audience energy in a fashion most able to provoke that peculiar "vaudeville pleasure."

Shifting spots in the bill had the potential to deeply affect the audience's reception of the act. Audience members, aware of the intention for each spot in a five act, seven act, or nine act bill, sometimes assigned varying degrees of worth to performers based on their placement. Staging an opera vocalist in the fifth slot of a nine-act bill, for example, signaled to the audience that the manager considered the musician to be particularly talented. Forcing an act to the final position in a continuous house meant that one had made the act the "chaser," an act considered

⁵ M. J. Keating, Manager's Report, Detroit, Temple Theatre, 08 Dec. 1902, Keith-Albee Collection, University of Iowa, Iowa City.

marginally talented, but hardly worth the audience's time. That act's structural duty, the audience knew, was to "chase" them out of the theatre with mediocrity. Quite obviously, acts intent upon receiving good notices and larger contracts in the future closely monitored their placement in the bill.

One's placement in the bill had practical repercussion for staging, as well. Presentation of vaudeville routines was laid out according to the amount of stage depth accorded a particular routine. The lower the number, the less stage depth granted the turn. Playing "in one," for example, meant that the act had to play downstage of a dropped curtain, using only the most meager space near the apron. When a performer played to the full depth of the stage—something usually saved for acts that needed a great deal of space for movement or large sets—they were said to play "in five." Certain acts were suited to certain stage planes, of course, and were sometimes booked partly because they play at a certain depth. A trained pony act that could play in two—a rarity with an act of that size—would allow the manager to use the time of that performance to either set up or clear an act behind an upstage drop. Though acts were almost always prepared to play at a certain depth—monologists, for example, almost always played in one—they had to be ready to shift the playing of the act at a moment's notice from the manager. "Kickers," or chronic complainers about undesirable placement on the stage or in the bill, became the bane of the harried manager's existence.

Most importantly, the managers in circuit houses were required to submit weekly reports detailing the reception accorded to each act. Scores of carefully typed reports flitted across the country every week in an effort to synchronize the chain's approach to providing corporately controlled pleasure to a heterogeneous national crowd. Managers carefully observed each show, watching both performers and audience alike in the hopes that they could divine the secret to unlocking the perfect

arrangement and exact tweaking of each week's bill. The audience, largely ignored in other performance traditions, therefore received a tremendous amount of attention from the manager. As well, the manager was held responsible (be it by the public or the circuit) for maintaining polite vaudeville's allegiance to furthering middle-class respectability. Acts were censored, admonished, fined, and fired for offenses such as proclaiming "Son of a Gun!" or wearing tights that too closely resembled their own skin.

As vaudeville grew in national appeal and developed in complexity, two general types of theatres emerged: big time and small time. Small time houses (aka "three-a-days) usually played three shows each day and paid fair, but not exorbitant, salaries to their performers. Because of the heavy workload, performers rarely left the theatre after the first performance, having to make do with what food they could have delivered to the theatre. The appointment of the theatre itself, while not always shabby, often resembled mid-nineteenth century variety houses much more than the fantastic palaces financed by Keith-Albee. Audiences were usually drawn almost exclusively from neighborhoods surrounding the theatre. (Few traveled across town to see little known performers.) Such theatres maintained much of the charm, audience familiarity, and appetite for local flavor that had distinguished Pastor's early theatres. Despite this, few performers viewed the small time as anything more than a stepping stone to the less arduous working conditions, shorter hours, and greater remuneration of the big time. Small time was, in the words of Robert Snyder, "a minor league in which to prepare for the big leagues."⁶

Big time houses, quite often a circuit's premiere establishment in a given urban center, contracted their performers for two shows each day at significantly higher

⁶ Robert W. Snyder, *The Voice of the City: Vaudeville and Popular Culture in New York* (New York: Oxford UP, 1989) 62.

salaries. Stars of international renown played their stages. Classical mosaics were reproduced in the beautifully decorated lobbies that led to the cathedral auditoriums. Though tickets were more costly, audiences would often travel quite a ways to see such stars or appreciate such opulence. Though both big time and small time were bound (to different degrees) by vaudeville's developing adherence to "polite society," big time vaudeville had the capital to express this allegiance in more opulent fashion: middle class respectability became summarized in velvet upon damask upon gold upon marble. Few painted a lily with the enthusiasm of big time theatre owners; indeed, they might have thought to gild one.

As I began research for this thesis, I became aware that new elements of vaudeville performance, business structure, and cultural play kept entering my transom, and yet I seemed to be getting no closer to anything definitive about the genre. The simplest questions about the dates of its existence and the nature of its performances provided answers, certainly, but usually a host of equally supported, passionately argued positions from those long since dead. Historical works of the last decade celebrate vaudeville, at different times, as a nose-tweaking but innocuous trickster, a slow train to massification, and a tightly controlled corporate engine.

To an extent, all of these characterizations are true. Vaudeville's broad national appeal and voracious appetite for new material and advanced methods of operations means that were there few business models and even fewer types of acts that did not catch its wandering eye, albeit briefly. Seemingly every type of entertainment and performer appeared on at least one of the hundreds of variations of the classical big time urban stage. Some acts found their zenith in Poughkeepsie, others played the Palace for a salary of several thousand dollars per week. So rich, so varied, and so expansive were the concerns of the vaudeville stage that it presents at least one element in support of nearly any argument an historian may wish to make. It

contained a huge number of high class acts, for example. The quickest perusal of most bills brings to notice harp soloists, classical monologists, cellists, opera vocalists, and ballet companies. Sharing the bill, however, are trained seals, Apache dancers, clown magicians, and trick cyclists. Vaudeville's popular history remembers it as the clean, "family entertainment," but every manager's journal I opened contained constant calls to eliminate jokes about topics such as circumcision, extra-marital liaisons, homoeroticism, and the untold joys of rising hemlines.

Early studies spoke of vaudeville as if the form strode across the landscape with the mincing steps of one loathe to offend. The mantra of "politeness," so essential to the form's marketing strategies during its explosive growth, echoed resoundingly and unquestioned throughout succeeding works. Robert Snyder's *The Voice of the City*, the best of the new wave of vaudeville scholarship that began in the late 1980s, attempts to address this tendency. Acknowledging that the corporate "wall of moral purity had holes in it," Snyder makes a careful point to outline several challenges to the façade of Victorian sentimentality within the vaudeville house.⁷ Snyder's analysis, while an important acknowledgement of the complexities of vaudeville in performance, largely concerns itself with the inherent disjuncture present in a "morally pure" form featuring scantily clad dancing girls and divers. I was not surprised that a moralistic schema allowed relatively tame displays of sexuality to surface as subterfuge. Shirley Staples' earlier work on male-female comedy teams in vaudeville, for example, covers the topic in fine detail, painting a notable portrait of a genre rife with complexity and interested in engagement with social issues.⁸

⁷ Robert Snyder, *The Voice of the City: Vaudeville and Popular Culture in New York* (New York: Oxford UP, 1989) 142.

⁸ Shirley Staples, *Male and Female Comedy Teams in American Vaudeville, 1865-1932* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1981).

I was a bit flummoxed, however, that the historical vaudeville, in its transmutation from bawdier variety, appeared to have lost nearly every smidge of political and economic commentary. How, I wondered, could the bracingly political variety—that working class den of anthemic diatribes against the uptown “dudes”—have withered into an apolitical form content with occasional comments about the length of women’s skirts? Time in archives soon convinced me that a key element of vaudeville’s history had fallen to the louder voices of surviving managerial accounts. During an early research trip to the Ole Olson Collection at the University of Southern California I spent the better part of several weeks looking through material submitted by performers to the United Vaudeville Association in the early twentieth-century.⁹ The routines, some neatly typed and others dashed out long-hand on the back of packing lists, had sat sealed in a garage in Southern California until the early 1990s when they were donated to the university. Most were still unopened and uncataloged. Delightfully (and oddly) enough, the archivist allowed me to break the seal on every unopened envelope in the collection.

Prior to my trip I had spoken with Don B. Wilmeth, my mentor during my master’s work at Brown University and one of the early proponents of a more rigorous study of popular theatre. Prof. Wilmeth had grown entranced with popular performance during his childhood in Texas, a youth that saw his town occasionally enlivened by the odd traveling show or circus. His later work in the field was exacting and driven by the need to establish the far-flung archives and collections relating to

⁹ The Vaudeville Managers Protective Association, the parent of the UVA, Inc., was an organization created in part to combat the prevalence of stealing material in mature vaudeville. Performers could write out an act, date the copy, seal it in an envelope, and mail it to the headquarters in New York City. If a performer heard that another had performed this material she could appeal to the “supreme court of vaudeville” (a group of managers and performers allied with the Keith-Albee chain) who could mete out damages. Because this was a “union” controlled by management, submission and appeal to the body further solidified corporate control over labor. For a fuller history see Walter J. Kingsley, “Vaudeville is Reconstructed and Establishes its Own Supreme Court,” ed. Charles W. Stein, *American Vaudeville as Seen by Its Contemporaries* (New York: Knopf, 1984) 135-137.

popular forms as locations of serious study and research. Yet my early training under Prof. Wilmeth also painted for me a vaudeville that had, to use one of my favorite lines from vaudeville criticism, “nothing on her mind but hair.” His crucial, early reference guide on variety entertainments, while acknowledging that “vaudeville helped to dictate morals and attitudes more than any other form of American entertainment during a time of significant changes,” nonetheless qualifies the claim by questioning whether the form consciously sought to do so.¹⁰ It was, for Prof. Wilmeth, an “anti-intellectual” genre whose “aim was to amuse and distract while making as much money as possible.”¹¹

Sitting down in the sea of envelopes I therefore readied myself for a stream of nonsense and folderol, one whose material would only occasionally and haphazardly trammel the ground reserved for the era’s politicians, cultural theorists, and social reformers. Certainly, much of what greeted my perusal fit the bill. A great deal was unabashedly silly and of seemingly little critical import. Yet I was stunned to notice how much of the material not only searchingly examined issues touching upon class, race, gender, and ethnicity, but also how much of the material clearly targeted these attacks—they can be called nothing else—in a fashion that was anything but accidental. One 1922 comic song alone, for example, lambasted Jews, capitalism, Spanish poverty, prohibition, short skirts, and non-skid tires.¹² Other routines featured impoverished men singing street side arias to their last nickel or women from the secretarial pool bemoaning their subservience to the male corporate power structure. Apparently, this was the “clean,” politically disengaged appearance of late vaudeville.

¹⁰ Don B. Wilmeth, *Variety Entertainments and Outdoor Amusements: A Reference Guide* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1982) 133.

¹¹ Wilmeth 133.

¹² Jay Ramond and Whitehead, “Ten Minutes with the Bull,” Ole Olson Collection, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, California.

I was also struck by a peculiar phenomenon of performing archival research on vaudeville: everyone had a relative who traveled in vaudeville at some point. In over twelve years of researching throughout the country I have yet to complete a single trip without a librarian or fellow researcher going out of their way to strike up a conversation. After a couple of obligatory questions about my project, the other party invariably names a relative—often a grandparent—who traveled in vaudeville. Had I heard of the person? Did I know anything about the act she might have used? Would it help if one could find out the great-aunt's maiden name?

As a former actor, I am accustomed to “talking shop” with interested parties. It is, in fact, one of the more enjoyable aspects about working in so public a field as theatre. And yet, the questions with which these strangers peppered me arrived with an insistency that at first seemed odd. Surely, their own attics or family memories had a better chance of unearthing information than I would have in plucking one name out of the tens of thousands who performed in the various fields of vaudeville. One day, however, turning over a series of yellowing routines with my white gloved hands, I began to replace a fairly commonplace letter of solicitation from a vaudevillian to a manager when something on the back of the page caught my eye. There, in cramped handwriting scored with what looked to be a pencil nibbled down to the nub, ran a vaudevillian's complete packing list for several months away from home. For the first time I began to appreciate that most in vaudeville had truly lived in theatres for decades. Attics contained little memorabilia because they only packed for work. Family members faltered because the performer had simply not spent much time with his or her family. And in one sad case, a film historian in Los Angeles said that her aunts had traveled as an act near the end of vaudeville, only to return home a short time later. Apparently failures in a genre with little mercy for the breed, the aunts, she told me, refused to speak about those few weeks in their lives. Each of these politely

insistent inquiries felt hungry for information in a way that surprised me. Each person who approached me knew that there was something essential and strange and personally gripping about what that relative had spent so much time doing, and each hoped that somewhere in the blue envelopes and thick manager's books lay these lost, electrically charged days. Undeterred by vaudeville's reputation for "Muppet Show" frivolity, they were sure that their relatives had done something great.

I increasingly came to believe that they were right. Later work in archives across the country confirmed that a strong strain of social, political, and cultural engagement, most markedly present in the early routines of variety impresario Tony Pastor in the 1860s and 1870s, had shot through vaudeville throughout its existence. Comic sketches on the "new woman" in the 1890s were succeeded by early twentieth-century routines on William Jennings Bryan. Puckish parodies of political speeches and electoral politics popped up in each decade of vaudeville's existence. Far from a polite form that shied away from addressing the ills and graces of its period, vaudeville had instead been a genre that nightly debated matters of great import. Vaudeville was an unabashedly populist genre that nonetheless staged canny, incisive dissections of issues such as war reparations, domestic violence, and immigration. Vaudeville management, representatives of polite culture's reflexive need to serve the interests of the capital that had created it, disciplined such performers time and again, only to have the itinerant wag move on to seed more ground with discontentment. The staccato pith of vaudeville comedy, for example, beat an insistent tattoo through the elevated, decorous speechifying of those less interested in honest investigation than the sound of their own voice.

Moreover, the intensity of vaudeville's excoriations—flames that burned all the brighter for the brevity and economy with which they had to appear—served an audience that importantly mixed middle- and working class audience members

together in pursuit of justice and social equity. If the polite culture and better society within the vaudeville house attempted to pull the middle class into the upper class's gravitational orbit, the vaudevillians themselves sought to pull them back. The alliance between the working and middle classes needed constant tending and reiteration of shared purpose. Venues such as the settlement house and the vaudeville theatre allowed these two groups to weld themselves together in a purposeful march toward redemptive action. Vaudeville, in this sense, did not comment on current events, it created them.

Most important, as Cressy noted, the voices entering the discussion were legion and newly diverse. Women, immigrants, and African Americans wrote and performed material that played in front of millions of citizens in the crucible of Progressive Era America. At the very moment vehement arguments about English language education, labor policy, divorce law, and immigrant rights filled the five daily editions of countless newspapers, the largest form of entertainment in the country gathered disparate audience members for communal address of these same issues. To label this discussion "anti-intellectual," it seemed, was to presume so rarified a nature to intellectualism that few in the public sphere would ever be able to meaningfully engage in such debate.

Indeed, the vaudeville that had been so decorously patted on the head and sent to bed in a single line of most theatre history indices suffers most when viewed through the self-serving lens of its own marketing efforts. Eager to sell a popular theatre for a mass audience, vaudeville magnates simply eliminated public discussions of the genre's many complexities and internal disagreements. The emphasis on suitability for children and women, in particular, pushed managers to frame the vaudeville theatre as an island of escape in otherwise bustling, problematic times. Edward F. Albee, one of the most powerful managers in corporate vaudeville, liked to

paint New York City as little more than “neighborhood districts dotted with family theatres,”¹³ each of which was served by a “cohesive and cooperative [managerial attitude] of courtesy, consideration, and comfort for everybody....”¹⁴ It was far easier to sell a theatre that discomfited no one rather than one that challenged each patron at some point during the evening, week, or season.

Lurking within the dismissal of vaudeville’s efficacy and intention lies a belittling elitist sentiment: if that many people could consume the work, it must not have been operating at a high level of critique. Emblemizing this strain of thought, Herbert Gans, though admitting “all levels of taste” into his consideration, nonetheless finds only “the higher cultures” capable of creating great art or good citizens.¹⁵ We theatre historians have been no better about fixing the popular under our own lens. In an early edition of his seminal omnibus theatre history text, Oscar Brockett, though first acknowledging that “the majority of theatres continued to emphasize more popular fare,” accords vaudeville a four sentence paragraph; in the current edition, despite decades of new scholarship, he has not changed or added a single word.¹⁶ This seeming disavowal of vaudeville’s importance nagged me. It seemed strange that a genre that had so dominated the national theatre scene and so clearly contained well-honed critical arguments should fall so surely from regard for anything beyond its ticket sales. One could almost hear the famous Alfred Jarry assertion that true art existed only for the five hundred Parisians capable of understanding it.

¹³ Harvey Alexander Higgins, Jr. “Breaking Into Vaudeville,” *Shadowland* (Oct. 1919) 40.

¹⁴ Edward F. Albee, “Twenty Years of Vaudeville,” ed. Charles W. Stein, *American Vaudeville as Seen by Its Contemporaries* (New York: Knopf, 1984) 216.

¹⁵ Herbert J. Gans, “Popular Culture in America: Social Problem in a Mass Society or Social Asset in a Pluralist Society?” *Literary Taste, Culture and Mass Communication, Vol. 1: Culture and Mass Culture*, Eds. Peter Davison, Rolf Meyersohn, and Edward Shils. (Cambridge: Chadwick-Healy, 1978) 288.

¹⁶ Oscar G. Brockett, *History of the Theatre* (Fourth Edition) (Boston, Allyn and Bacon, 1982) 528. Oscar G. Brockett and Franklin J. Hildy, *History of the Theatre* (Fourth Edition) (Boston, Allyn and Bacon, 2003) 350.

Laurence Levine's *Highbrow/Lowbrow*, a study of what Levine regards as the emergence of cultural hierarchy in America, helped frame the question in a different light. Beginning with the premise that early nineteenth-century Americans had embraced a panoply of art forms across various taste cultures, Levine identifies the rise of polite culture as an enabler in the sacralization and debasement of various cultural forms. These continued divergences answer many questions for Levine. As soon as symphony orchestras eliminate Sousa and force Wagner upon their initially unwilling patrons, America has its sacred culture. And the fact that relatively few members of the modern-day working class patronize forms of sacred culture would seem to support his thesis.

Yet vaudeville, I realized, frustrates all of Levine's tidy historical claims. Long after a pacific audience supposedly accepted art as "a one-way process: the artist communicating and the audience receiving," vaudeville audience members were talking back and taking part in routines, often against the will of the performers and management.¹⁷ Far past the point where Shakespeare was seemingly thrust from the popular's ability to affectionately parody, a 1924 New York vaudeville reviewer wearily called for an end to "the high-art fever which threatened to burn up honest diversion early in the season." (In particular, he was relieved that a recent "flapper Capulet" had "gotten by without any 'I'm just crazy 'bout Hammy' jazz song and dance from Ophelia."¹⁸) It seemed clear that under Levine's formulation the sixteenth-century Italian principle of genre contamination held sway: a single pluck of a banjo string, for Levine, turned the entire performance of a Mozart piece into lowbrow Appalachian music.

¹⁷ Lawrence Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1988) 195.

¹⁸ Bland Johaneson, newspaper review, New York Theatre, July 1924. Harvard Theatre Collection, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

My own interest in vaudeville indeed sprung from early graduate work in genre theory of Italian Renaissance tragicomedies. Taken with the notion that differing genres of performance might actually contaminate one another when intermingled before an audience, I was struck by an observation that American vaudeville, a topic I had briefly addressed in an earlier course, seemed either oblivious to such concerns or immune to whatever deleterious effects might accompany the admixture. Opera ran headlong into banjo duets, eveningwear occupied the same stage as baggy pants, Irish bantered with African American, and proto-feminists accompanied hopeless misogynists.

My scholarly entry point into the following study therefore lay precisely at that point where categories and taxonomies fail. Vaudeville, with its mixture of Goethe and clog dancing, could not fulfill categorical expectations of either highbrow or lowbrow art. African Americans and whites, native born and immigrants, men and women, adults and children, all attended various vaudeville houses. Unapologetic asininity bumped up against impassioned political rhetoric. Advertisements for ladies' furs swelled the programs while jeremiads about the rising anger of the working poor filled the stages. Gleefully occupying a place outside of the boxes we usually use to delineate and define our theatrical enterprises, vaudeville appeared to have been exiled from greater historical consideration partly due to its sheer complexity and partly out of its dismissal of any neat historiographical address.

Early analyses of vaudeville were hardly that. Because the genre had evolved from previous forms in a fashion that seemed both overnight and lost to the mists of history, few of its contemporaries could agree on when vaudeville began and when it ended. Many eulogizing vaudeville in the 1930s and 1940s couldn't even seem to agree that the corpse was cold. Writing in 1938, long after the coffin was ringed with nails, former vaudeville critic Sidney Paine tremulously maintained, "Vaudeville isn't

dead. It can never be. There'll always be talent."¹⁹ In 1940 Douglas Gilbert's *American Vaudeville: Its Life and Times*, the first major work on vaudeville, appeared.²⁰ Though an invaluable early treatment of a recently eclipsed form, Gilbert's work too often emblemizes a trait that still hampers vaudeville scholarship. Hamstrung by the infrequency with which performers left behind detailed accounts of their material, lives on the road, or interaction with managers and the public, Gilbert acquiesces to the gravitational pull of newspaper morgue press clippings, public relations material, and vanity press hagiography attempting to limn managers and noted performers in the best of lights. Hard numbers are both the delight and bane of *American Vaudeville*. We are gratified to have comparative salary listings, and chastened by the ease with which Gilbert accepts the neat corporate narrative of vaudeville's evolution. Indeed, of its sins, the tendency to uncritically accept claims of a pacific audience and evolved performer hurts most. Gilbert does, however, provide a key (if somewhat wandering) focus on the warring managerial class that so intruded upon and yet enabled vaudeville itself.

When the hard facts of the Depression, then Word War II, and finally the advent of television made the demise evident to even the most hopeful, works celebrating and memorializing vaudeville appeared. Authors such as Joe Laurie, Jr. and Abel Green kicked off the Eisenhower decade with a string of books as fond of vaudeville as they are compromised by a chattily uncritical tone.²¹ The books remain essential compendia of performers, providing knowing glances into the factors contributing to the success or failure of theatres, managers, and acts. More than anything, the Laurie and Green books match my own interest in the form's hunger for

¹⁹ Sidney J. Paine, "Awaiting Vaudeville's Return to Local Stage," *Boston Transcript*, 17 Dec. 1938.

²⁰ Douglas Gilbert, *American Vaudeville: Its Life and Times* (New York: Whittlesey House, 1940).

²¹ See Joe Laurie, Jr., *Vaudeville: From the Honky-Tonks to the Palace* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1953); *The Spice of Variety*, ed. Abel Green (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1952); and Joe Laurie, Jr. and Abel Greene, *Show Biz From Vaude to Video* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1951).

salable reinvention. Vaudeville was defined by the continual tension between identities of familiarity and novelty. (One show in the late 1890s marketed itself as “The Old Reliable” while promising “New Faces—New Features! ... In an entirely new, original, and novel program.”²²)

It was not until the appearance of Albert F. McLean’s *American Vaudeville as Ritual* in 1968 that the field possessed its first genuinely adroit, historically situated work. Wishing to submit the “’spirit’ of a people” to “critical examination,” McLean not only understands vaudeville’s history as a series of different movements but uses this schema to tease apart immigrant humor, the evolution of the joke, and the growth of comic address.²³ I draw greatly upon McLean’s analysis of vaudeville attendance as a ritual, one that forged and then fire-tested new kinship bonds and patterns of socio-political critique. Shirley Staples’ aforementioned work on male-female comedy teams also informs my own approach to the women performers as female subjects. In particular, her theorization about the determinative role of audience class composition in the formation of routines drives some of my own approach.

The audience itself remains a dilemma for every vaudeville scholar. In one sense, it’s nearly impossible to speak about “vaudeville” as a uniform genre or cultural phenomenon. Performances took place in working-class halls and middle-class gilded palaces. Vaudevillians traveled the Orpheum circuit and Keith-Albee circuit in comparative luxury when held against their compatriots in the Peanut circuit in New England. Big-time and small-time vaudeville often had radically different aesthetics, performance environments, financial structures, and of course, audiences. Albee,

²² Theatre program, “Gus Hill’s World of Novelties and Greatest All-Feature Show,” Arch Street Theatre, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library.

²³ Albert F. McLean, Jr., *American Vaudeville as Ritual* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1968) ix.

eager to secure for vaudeville a place as “the representative American national form of theatring,” denied all of this, stating

uniformity, not possible in other branches of theatrical entertainment, is certainly one of the potent reasons for the universal popularity of vaudeville, for the public everywhere rightly holds to the thought that what is good enough for New York is none too good for them.²⁴

Like many of his panegyrics, the above assertion should be read with a healthy skepticism bordering on incredulity. Clearly, different persons watching different acts in different environments radically affect the object of analysis. For this reason, my own study focuses on the medium-time and big-time houses that were peopled by a mixture of working and middle-class patrons. For the most part, this eliminates the lamentably understudied small-time houses, as well as the astoundingly rich fields created by those theatres dedicated to performance in Yiddish and Italian, and for African American patrons. I sacrifice discussion of these theatres and their patrons due to the necessary focus for a work of this length and because most of the existing archival material supports study of the large chains that more assiduously preserved their records. It is, however, a series of theatres to which I hope my succeeding work shall return.

Nevertheless, this emphasis upon the larger theatres allows me to more exactly focus on the relationship between audience and performer during this period. Both Richard Butch and David Nasaw have done interesting work in this area since Snyder’s book re-opened the field.²⁵ Butsch’s detailed (if too brief) examination of what he holds to be the vaudevillian’s “artificial intimacy and spontaneity” serves as a

²⁴ Albee, “Twenty Years of Vaudeville” 216.

²⁵ Richard Butsch, *The Making of American Audiences: From Stage to Television, 1750-1990* (Cambridge UP, 2000). David Nasaw, *Going Out: The Rise and Fall of Popular Amusements* (New York: Basic Books, 1993).

necessary corrective for overblown claims that variety's "jolly and Rabelaisian humor" survived the transition to vaudeville unscathed.²⁶ I join Butsch in his all too rare notation of the vaudevillian's continual attempt to combat censorship. Nasaw, however, seeks to place vaudeville audiences uncomfortably in a false historical continuum of American spectatorship by requiring vaudeville to serve as the bridge from lingering Jacksonian rebelliousness to the docility that enabled movie houses. Yet each notes that the shift in audience demeanor and interaction was a complicated element of vaudeville performance, one that defies the neat characterizations handed down by managers. Finally, though her work is compromised by the mix of exactitude and shifting focus peculiar to converted dissertations, M. Alison Kibler's book on the intersection between gendered performance and cultural hierarchy contains perhaps the most adept theorization of the combat nestling within the very act of vaudeville spectatorship.²⁷ Her dexterous interweaving of managerial control, audience resistance, and performance environment helped serve as a model for my own examination of the shift in spectatorship during the rise of cinema in the vaudeville house.

Appropriate to my own initial interest in genres created and coordinated by Renaissance *literati*, my thesis explores how attempts to narrate the existence of vaudeville itself unveiled the mechanisms of control and collusion that lay at its heart. More than anything, vaudeville survives as an often discordant polyphony of claims, remembrances, and creeds. On one level, one must understand these competing narratives as remnants of very public tactical battles. Managers sold polite frivolity

²⁶ Butsch 116. Frank Caverly, a performer turned critic, provides the useful phrasing concerning variety's freeness, though he lamented its passing during the rise of vaudeville. Frank Caverly, "Variety Has Brought Fame to Many Since Hub Birth," *Boston American*, 06 Aug. 1931, Harvard Theatre Collection, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

²⁷ Alison Kibler, *Rank Ladies: Gender and Cultural Hierarchy in American Vaudeville* (Chapel Hill, NC: UNC UP, 1999).

laced with unthreatening edification. Performers, eager for notability and the bookings they created, hungered for reputations that were at once palatable and sensational. And America itself searched for a form varied and powerful enough to compass and express its myriad voices and struggles. Perhaps lost in all this, as is so often the case with theatre, is the history of the audience. The work that follows might be fairly looked upon as an attempt to triangulate among performer and manager in a search for the restive, interrogative group that occupied the new tip-up chairs in popular theatres during vaudeville's half-century. The patrons arrive to us in fragments, lurking as the random complaint in a manager's report here, and popping up in a performer's memoir there. They are, like most of their fellows in the now darkened auditorium, all too susceptible to the machinations of others' histories.

Such a fate is perhaps more unfair to the vaudeville spectator than to her compatriot in any other form of American entertainment. Long before breathless reports of weekend cinema box office tallies headlined a web page, far before Nielsen placed his first viewer box on a television, vaudeville patrons were observed with a seriousness of purpose that is staggering to the modern sensibility. Managers watched the audience much of the time, not the performers, and filed detailed reports concerning their diverse reactions to the corporate headquarters. Performers sought to reach past the footlights and preserve a faltering performance through direct engagement and enjoiner to involvement. Not nearly the passive, monolithic white collar assemblage neatly framed in vaudeville's traditional history, the audience was instead an often motley group of men and women, day laborers and executives, and Progressives and conservatives. Tellingly, at the points when managers and performers most needed accurate analysis of the audience, both refused to simplify the masses into masses. The African American section of a gallery of a Monday afternoon crowd *meant* something far different than the rear portion of the orchestra

on a Thursday evening, and was investigated and serviced as such. All of Albee's paeans to uniformity to the contrary, vaudeville might have been the last time during which people living in the nation expressed themselves in all of their force and diversity during live performance.

Chapter One, "'Kindred Indecencies:' Class, Respectability, and Cultural Hierarchy" analyzes the genre's absorption with economic class and the rising culture of middle-class respectability. Locating an early interest in and commitment to working class culture in late variety, I argue that the rise of polite vaudeville necessitated a concomitant granting of respectability as an adjunct to admission. Additionally, I refute the false divide between high art and popular performance in the vaudeville house. Tracing the continued presence of both strains within the body of single acts, I establish mature vaudeville as a venue that appropriated highbrow acts with nearly complete disregard for what Laurence Levine has argued as its sacred state in the twentieth-century. The traditional reading, I hold, prizes an antiquated notion that "one drop of blood" from the lower form (and I employ the racial overtone knowingly) fatally compromises the cultural capital formerly present in the opera, ballet, or sonnet. Instead, we must move toward an understanding of the vaudeville theatre as one that demanded equal submission of all cultural artifacts to the expertise of the performer and the demand for novelty.

Chapter Two, "'The Creedless Critic:' Collusion and Power in Vaudeville Performance" examines the role of audience agency in vaudeville performance. Countering the traditional reading of vaudeville audiences as uniform and largely passive, I draw upon manager's reports, routines, newspaper reviews, and performer memoirs in arguing for an audience that struggled for control of the performance event with the manager and performer. Though framing the audience as a different beast than that which had roared in the rum-soaked Jacksonian playhouse, I establish the

complicated relationship between audience and performer that allowed the former to inform the performance in real-time. Managers played an important interlocutory role in this relationship, of course, but this chapter seeks to understand the managerial force as both controlling and hopelessly compromised. In particular, I examine frustrated censorship as an emblem of unsuccessful restraint. The content-aspect of the various vaudeville routines also emerges as richly laced with contentious, topical, and emotionally charged fare, all at a time when orthodox managerial history seeks to paint a picture of inconsequential novelties. Most importantly, I argue that the aesthetic of vaudeville spectatorship not only coincided with but abetted the aims of Progressive reform.

Chapter Three, “Against the devil:’ Ethnicity, Investiture, and Erasure in Variety Entertainments, 1870-1930” traces the play of the ethnic self from Tony Pastor’s variety afterpieces through mature vaudeville. Though Pastor’s theatres had depended upon a heavy amount of ethnic material during the period of vaudeville’s creation, the rise of the succeeding genre witnessed an inexorable decline in such performance material. I trace many of these changes to vaudeville’s embrace of specialization and the collapse of the local houses. Shifts in immigration patterns in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century also rise as culprits in the de-ethnicizing of the vaudeville stage, introducing, as they did, new ethnic types that were simultaneously too close and far away from the white, Northern European types of previous periods. Finally, I argue that the shift from Pastor’s familiar employment of stock types to an ethnic presence best understood as a cultural contaminant reflected and aided the homogenizing drive of Progressive Era Americanization movements,

Chapter Four, “‘Dreams of the World:’ Cinema and the Enervation of Vaudeville Spectatorship” historically situates the radical shift in vaudeville with the growing prominence of cinema in the vaudeville bill. Though vaudeville had proved

capable of absorbing many different sub-genres of entertainment within its own form, cinema, sealed to the productive force of the interactive audience member, created a new way of looking in vaudeville. Acts initially attempted to absorb and challenge cinema's unyielding photoplay before eventually succumbing to lesser places on the bill. Because the new mode of spectatorship precluded meaningful interaction, vaudeville's formerly restive national audience nightly consented to a ritualizing and internalizing of the impotence that would come to define the citizenship role in the mass media democracy. In the end, vaudeville audiences surrendered their ability to create culture and finally lapsed into the docile crowd required by the new medium.

In saying this, I hope to make it evident that my concern lies less in a history of the acts that played vaudeville than in the collision and collusion between spectator, performer, and surrounding society. In the sense that this thesis creates a history, it attempts to trace the shifting form of various phenomena in the entertainment sphere created by vaudeville: liveness, productivity, social engagement, and counter-hegemonic agency. There are inherent historiographical problems in this approach. Years ago I read a book review of a work that purported to be a history of night. The vexed reviewer explained to his readers that, entertaining though the book might be, the goal of the work was terminally flawed. One could not write a history of night. It was a time, a span, with no will or consequential agency. One could, however, write a history of *what people did at night*. Following this logic, this thesis is not a history of the performance phenomena that draw me time and again into vaudeville archives. Rather, it is a history of the social, cultural, and economic negotiations between a set of performers, managers, and spectators. I am less concerned with liveness, for example, than I am with what happened in its presence that later dwindled in its absence.

It is no accident that my scholarly work drew me to genre theory in the Italian Renaissance and American popular theatre in the late-nineteenth century. Both eras and locations hosted lively debates about whatever efficacious role theatrical performance might play, be it the spiritual realm of the *literati* or the social utility of the Progressives. Vaudeville's period witnessed the maturation of the suffrage movement and anti-lynching campaigns, the birth of the Square Deal (and subterranean fomenting of the New Deal), and the explosion of Americanization. The FDA arose to push mercury out of food products. Public health became a topic of concern. Labor safety rose first as an issue, and then, after the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire, as a national crisis. Vaudeville was not created as a forum for discussing the attendant reforms that sprang up in the wake of singular tragedies and long-simmering inequities. Yet its lifespan is almost exactly co-terminous with Progressivism, bursting into national prominence in the early 1880s, growing into full force throughout the late 1890s and early 1910s, and then faltering in the 1920s.

I do not suggest a causal link between these timelines. The death of vaudeville, in all likelihood, had little direct effect on the slowing of Progressive zeal. Yet these two social elements, one a massive entertainment form, the other an ambitious set of socio-economic redresses, necessarily informed one another. There is thus an untold story about the conjunction of genre and movement. An old historiography professor of mine once told our class, "I don't believe in accidents. I believe in co-incidents." He then paused, mulled this over for a moment, and added, "But if they remain 'co' for very long, then they're feeding one another." True enough, vaudeville admitted all of Progressivism's most important topics and more onto its stages, providing a wild marriage between whistle-stop campaign debate and circus ring. Because of vaudeville's scope, diversity, and willingness to collapse distinctions between subject and object positions during performance, I firmly believe

that thorough examination of this theatre genre and its period tells us more about the complexities of modern society than any comparable form.

Finally, this project has always been a bit of a reclamation project for me. My introduction to vaudeville came in a course in which the instructor clearly loved the material and individuals involved, and yet seemed compelled to back-peddle from his own valuation. There hung in the air the assumption that vaudeville's address of labor issues must have been less profound than in the 1930s worker plays, and that vaudeville's sterling ethnic comedians had to have provoked a slightly less knowing laugh than had the actors in a Wilde play. Among lovers of art, as Levine noted in discussing the possibility of a Norman Rockwell exhibit at a fine arts museum, the avowedly popular often represents a bridge too far.²⁸ One constantly encounters slightly embarrassed qualifications choking off every moment of discovery and contention: "It was incredibly adventurous cinematography... *for a television movie.*" Little in my reading has borne this out.

Deeper meaning, ideological underpinnings, and content orientation aside, vaudeville's Shakespearean performers represented the finest talent on the American stage. It's opera vocalists often turned down major European houses in pursuit of vaudeville riches. And yes, its banjo soloists and Burmese foot jugglers, both of which played alongside the sonnets and Verdi, were, as critic Winifred Ward surmised in 1922, "of their kind, perfect." At its highest level, vaudeville, whatever else one might think of it, most likely represented the most prolonged period of pure excellence in American live performance. One rehearsed and honed an act for years to make it in the big-time. Competition for the best spots on the bill was fierce. Many fields of American performance (e.g., juggling, comic monologue, duo performance) have never recovered from the loss of vaudeville's fertile training grounds and expert

²⁸ Levine 1.

audiences. “You may not like what they are doing or how they are doing it,” Ward maintained, but if vaudevillians weren’t doing it well, “it wouldn’t be there....”²⁹

I have, in my basement, my only personal artifact from vaudeville. Shortly before I left Ithaca, an organization with which I had done some volunteer work was preparing for its annual rummage sale. As I wound about the hall setting up tables, a wonderful fellow volunteer took my hand and pulled me over to the middle of the room where I saw an item labeled with my name. Someone had donated a vaudevillian’s road trunk to the center for its sale. Knowing the focus of my scholarly work—I talked about it incessantly, often referring to long dead performers and managers as if I knew them—the ladies managing the sale had pulled it aside and made a gift of it. It is enormous. There are separate drawers for properties and “trick shoes.” An ironing board slides out of a hidden compartment. It is too heavy to move without a railroad porter’s assistance. And it belonged, I am sure, to someone’s great-uncle. Felicitously, the span of history during which this trunk crossed the country witnessed meaningful actions and public debate on a host of important, resonant issues. Many of these occurred just a few feet away from the dressing rooms in which it lay.

²⁹ Winifred Ward, “Inside Secrets About Your Favorite Vaudeville Star,” *Philadelphia Public Ledger* 13 Aug. 1922: 6.

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CHAPTER 1

“KINDRED INDECENCIES:” CLASS, RESPECTABILITY, AND CULTURAL HIERARCHY

Speaking of variety entertainment shortly after the turn of the century, monologist George Fuller Golden forcefully argued that an “advanced vaudeville” could represent “all that is best in the dramatic, operatic, and concert fields; in fact, in every field of amusement.” Those “Ibsenites” who had “pursed their lips in contempt” at the often wildly disparate acts that constituted nightly bills, Golden felt, allowed their cultural prejudices to blind them to the importance of his medium in the nation’s drive toward cultural betterment: vaudeville’s popularity across the spectra of America’s economic classes exposed those who might have attended only for the acrobats and melodramatic playlets also to “the highest class of artists.” In so doing, he maintained, “some of those less cultured brethren may thereby be swindled into a taste for these so-called higher essays.” Yet even if the vaudeville fan manages to elude the grip of high culture during her time in the theatre, Golden slyly notes, a portion of her ticket purchase goes to support the short scene from Shakespeare or Shaw.³⁰

It should not be surprising that Golden professed such trust in the power of vaudeville to elevate its faithful through the increasingly rigid hierarchy of America’s taste cultures. Golden began his entertainment career as a boxer in Michigan. When the “pug” grew “tired of punching and being punched,” reports vaudeville memoirist Joe Laurie, he joined with another former boxer and formed a dance act in vaudeville. After his partner left him for another act, Golden began a long and successful career as

³⁰ George Fuller Golden, *My Lady Vaudeville and Her White Rats* (New York: Broadway Publishing C., 1909) 8-10

one of the first “intellectual monologists.” Golden gained renown among his fellow vaudevillians, many of whom lacked any formal education, for his astounding autodidacticism. Within a short time of beginning his monologue career, the former boxer, now a fervent consumer of classic literature could “rattle off poetry and chapters of the Bible by the yard.”

Golden might have been happy had he remained but a respected monologist in polite vaudeville. It was, however, his unlucky fortune to live a life that uncannily played out the ascendancy, dominance and final collapse of vaudeville itself. Golden’s early days in the ring serve as the perfect analog for the rough-and-tumble brand of American variety, crystallized in the 1840s and perfected by Tony Pastor throughout the 1860s and 1870s. The transition from ring to book and stage traced precisely the arc taken by variety as it transmuted its socially abject form into respectable vaudeville. The final act of Golden’s life found him as the fervent and revered leader of the White Rats, vaudeville’s only authentic labor union. As with the vaudeville managers’ search for order and unimpeachable respectability within the new American middle class, Golden failed to win success in a series of bitter strikes and attempts at reorganization. Finally, blacklisted by the managers and largely forgotten among even those for whom he had sacrificed his career, Golden succumbed to tuberculosis, or more properly, consumption. George M. Cohan sprinkled his ashes over the Statue of Liberty.³¹

In the following chapter I wish to address the shift in ethos and product that defined the evolution of variety into vaudeville. I argue that the traditional reading of Tony Pastor’s actions and motives throughout the 1870s and 1880s demands a far more detailed linkage between his hungers for wealth, status, class definition, and

³¹ Joe Laurie, *Vaudeville from the Honky-Tonks to the Palace* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1953) 173-174.

artistic growth. Primarily, I am concerned with vaudeville's embrace of polite culture in the late nineteenth-century as the *sine qua non* for managerial domination of the rambunctious audiences inherited from variety. I am interested in exploring the manner in which managerial proclamations about refinement, fashion, and respectability in polite vaudeville served as masking devices for their own attempts at corporate empire. Pastor and his successors, I mean to establish, used the trappings of gentility, refinement, and higher taste cultures largely to reap greater profits at the box office, not out of allegiance to the cultural battles being fought in symphony halls and the works of an increasingly frustrated Matthew Arnold. Performers often aided this tactic by playing at upper class in their routines and public personae, acknowledging the supposedly more delicate palates of those in the orchestra seats.

This embrace of upper income taste cultures represented more than an abstract issue of aesthetics. Vaudeville's trumpeting and pursuit of what Lawrence Levine terms "sacred culture" (e.g., classical music, *Hamlet*), I argue, ultimately proved highly detrimental to the working class patrons that had enabled vaudeville's maturation by their earlier support of variety.³² I establish that the oppressive interests of consolidated capital—represented most perniciously in the era's trusts—mirrored and fired those inclinations toward social repression and abjection that created the widening late nineteenth century divide between the popular and sacred cultures. The spectatorial abilities to interrogate and reshape culture during live performance

³² Lawrence Levine treats the concept of sacralized culture in his exploration of the widening divisions in taste culture in the mid-nineteenth century. Having established that forms such as Italian opera and Shakespeare were "*simultaneously* popular and elite," Levine argues for a division by the end of the century between the two audiences and their attendant entertainments. "Sacred" culture (e.g., Beethoven) belonged to the minute part of the population with the economic means to support it and the education to "fully" appreciate the nuances in such work; popular culture belongs to those who typically earn less and often lack the training to make full use of complex cultural offerings. He further argues that proponents of the newly sacralized culture argue for the exclusion of contaminating popular forms and for the presentation of the piece in its entirety and in an appropriate cultural context. By the end of the century, Levine, finds, the "ownership" of figures such as Shakespeare had passed from the popular grasp into the hands of the economic elite. Lawrence Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1988) 83-167.

created, I believe, tools that enabled the pursuit of social justice and pan-class equity. Surrendering these tools to the cause of refinement ultimately injured those who most benefit from these pursuits.

The issue of “class” itself becomes problematic when one lodges the discussion within American popular entertainment; it can become hopelessly muddled when the particular genre of interest is vaudeville. As a scholar who has been deeply influenced by cultural Marxists (particularly those writing within the Frankfurt School tradition) and a justice theatre practitioner who advocates production organization within a framework first developed by autonomous Marxists in the 1960s, I recognize that the term “class” continues to be deployed in a multitude of sometimes useful and sometimes obscuring fashions. The usual concern in its employment lies in whether one primarily intends it as a portal for discussion for matters of economic or cultural division (though as cultural Marxists have demonstrated, any complete separation of these two is illusory). Such distinctions are both necessary and yet often hopeless in regard to variety and vaudeville. Early managers within the variety theatre were terribly concerned with economic class. They catered to working-class patrons, decamped to the neighborhoods of middle-class patrons, and signified their business success by printing program advertisements for products that often lay within the reach of only the wealthy. Aspects such as the cost of admission relative to other entertainments or the salaries of the acts are very much within the purview of this chapter.

And yet, the notion of “class” as a cultural signifier is also at the heart of vaudeville, a genre that most likely adopted its name out of a desire to appear “high class.” The fact that banjos and ragtime (both “low class” or “low brow”) jousting for stage time, salary, audience approbation, and managerial favor with opera and Shakespeare (both “high class” and “high brow”) says a great deal about the

frequently acrimonious combat between taste cultures that took place in the vaudeville house. I address this collision, but I am more interested in their collusion. I find the moment when classical harp becomes a frequently staged act in the popular theatre to be interesting, but find the moment where one 1916 harpist adds an automotive brake lever and shifting knob far more telling. When he begins to play jazz, I believe we're getting close to the heart of vaudeville's story.

Additionally, I intend to argue that the furtherance of Pastor's initial reforms by later "polite vaudeville" incorporated devices as varied as theatre décor and managerial curtain speeches, both of which colluded to regiment the audience behind the ritualistic enactment of middle class mores. Finally, I mean to trouble the view of vaudeville's content-aspect as a nest of unabated frippery in a post-sacred culture America. Instead, I argue, the works of both sacred and popular culture operated in an often tense, frequently complimentary fashion that served both performers and their diverse audiences in unseating the cultural assumptions behind the sequestration of high art. Though early champions of the popular, such as Gilbert Seldes, promoted what came to be called "lowbrow" culture as worthy of serious study,³³ I believe that the continued reliance upon hierarchical notions of culture itself—be it sacred and popular, highbrow and lowbrow, or "higher" and "lively"—force the debate into a fruitless ground of predetermined contestation. Ultimately, I position vaudeville as often capable of straddling, utilizing, and disregarding hierarchy and division alike.

Turn-of-the-century critic Hartley Davis, looking back on variety of the 1860s and 1870s, remembered an "outcast" that "pandered to the depraved interests of the few..."³⁴ The audience Davis recalled was decidedly working-class. In part, the

³³ Gilbert Seldes, *The 7 Lively Arts* (New York: Dover, 2001). For a thorough examination of Seldes' impact, see Michael Kammen, *The Lively Arts: Gilbert Seldes and the Transformation of Cultural Criticism in the United States* (New York: Oxford UP, 1996).

³⁴ Hartley Davis, "In Vaudeville," *Everybody's Magazine* August 1905: 232

location of various variety theatres cast them as the gathering places for the growing urban centers' working poor. Located far from the relatively safe and well-lit financial districts that had earlier given rise to treasured institutions such as the Park Theatre, most variety houses flourished in working-class, ethnic neighborhoods. Arguing that such theatres represented "an earthy counterpart to polished Broadway," Robert Snyder argues, "The differences between mid-nineteenth-century urban theatres increasingly expressed the social differences" between a city's inhabitants: "drama and opera houses for the rich, cheap Bowery theatres for the poor...."³⁵ In 1871, one magazine editor, gazing over the variety audience, found them "rough-looking, unkempt, unwashed, and horribly dressed, not because they are vicious but because they are poor and unrefined; because their labor is degrading in character, meager in pay, and uncertain in duration."³⁶ For members of the city's upper economic and cultural strata, simple admission of attendance at one of the variety theatres marked one as lower caste. "There was a mild uplifting of the eyebrows in polite circles," held one critic, "if some injudicious young man blurted out that he had seen a certain performer" at a variety theatre.³⁷

Many variety audience members embraced this outcast status as a badge of genuineness. Furthermore, this authenticity was based on positive in-group identification as hard-working laborers, rather than negative associations with "simpler" or degraded taste cultures. Audience members of the variety theatre, in one late late-nineteenth century critic's estimation, saw themselves as the "bones" and

³⁵ Robert Snyder, *The Voice of the City: Vaudeville and Popular Culture in New York* (New York: OUP, 1989) 5.

³⁶ H. Hutton qtd. in Richard Butsch, *The Making of American Audiences: From Stage to Television, 1750-1990* (New York: CUP, 2000) 103.

³⁷ "Changes in Vaudeville," 1899, Harvard Theatre Collection, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

“sinew” of America, not it’s “Society.”³⁸ Future variety and vaudeville impresario Tony Pastor almost certainly agreed with this reviewer’s estimation. The future impresario began his career in 1848 as a minstrel in “Raymond and Waring’s Menagerie.” Quite unlike many artists later in the century, who often pursued public identification with the upper economic classes due to their shared taste culture, Pastor felt the demands of his jobs inextricably linked him to his working-class audiences. Soon after beginning with Raymond and Waring’s, Pastor “graduated,” in his words, to further duties as ringmaster, rider, clown, and sentimental and comic vocalist. In this, he saw his working life to be fairly matched with those who toiled in the urban factories, butcher shops, and taverns. He might have been a variety performer, Pastor allowed, but only because it was a “variety of hard work.”³⁹ The initial bond between variety performer and spectator often forged itself in a celebration and affirmation of the spectators’ life-world importance to society, rather than a patronizingly educative attempt to “uplift” their cultural sensibilities.

Many of Pastor’s illiterate workingmen instead sang along with celebrations of the common laborer’s sterner stuff. Indeed, making a virtue of necessity, early variety accompanied its apotheosizing of common laborers with fustigations of all who would pretend to the throne of the ruling class, particularly those middle class folks whose performance of class struck variety performers as most obvious. Preceding Pastor’s move to 585 Broadway by a year, “In the Bowery” (1874) allies the theatre with the raucous “sons of toil” who, from their seats in the gallery, would fall under polite vaudeville’s withering gaze, while targeting “swells” with great élan:

Say that Central Park's the place,

For every kind of fun;

³⁸ Marcus, “The Variety Theatre,” newspaper clipping, Harvard Theatre Collection, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

³⁹ Interview with Tony Pastor, *New York Sun*, 27 Jan. 1907.

On Broadway and Fifth Avenue

Much pleasure others find.

But I'm a different sort of a chap

No fun in that I see,

For when I want enjoyment

The Bowery for me.

(Spoken. --) Yes, you may talk about your Broadway belles, your Fifth Avenue swells, your exquisitely-dressed creatures, with their lavender kids, and their la-de-da's, now, what do they know about enjoyment? They are afraid to go in for a little fun for fear of disarranging their toilets: and then what would Mrs. Grundy say? "Charles Frederick Augustus is getting decidedly vulgar; Seraphina Emilia is positively shocking!" But here in the Bowery people enjoy themselves just when they feel like it. They don't care a curse what others may say, for that's the custom.

No butterflies of fashion there,

Or idlers may be found,

But men with open hearts and hands

With honest labor browned;

Men who to help a friend in need,

Would their last dollar lend,

Who never live on other folks,

But earn the cash they spend.

(Spoken. --) Yes, there is no place in the Bowery for those well-dressed corner statues to try to look like millionaire's sons, while their mothers are out scrubbing for a dollar a day to support them in idleness. A fellow has no business on the east side of town unless he wants to work and earn his own

living. What fortune is there more honorable than that of a working man.

There was a Washington, he was a farmer, and Franklin a printer. Warren a doctor. Andy Johnson a tailor. Abe Lincoln a rail-splitter, and Grant a tanner.

If you want to see men who make our country great, who add to her wealth, develop her resources, maintain her strength and prosperity, you will always find them -- In the Bowery....⁴⁰

Pastor's "King of the Monkeys," a comic song from the same decade, joined in these counter-hegemonic sentiments. Purporting to be "an ancient fable," the tune reveals that all upper-crust gentlemen descend from an ancient monkey who, in imitation of a wandering "chappie," asked the king of the monkeys to cut off his tail, shave his face, and dress him well. The king reluctantly agrees, though he warns his erring subject that the visiting swell "has no more brain than you." In fact, confesses the king of the monkeys, "if you scratch a Dude you'll find a monkey underneath." The rapt monkey nonetheless undergoes the transformation into a gentleman. For his troubles, he is issued a monocle, cane and "idiotic grin." Pastor reaches his moral in revealing that such imitation of fools shattered the unity of the monkeys, his fabular working class. "The monkeys fell in love at once with all his stylish clothes," Pastor laments. "Their harmony was broken up—at last they came to blows."⁴¹

Variety's discomfort with this playing at higher class reflected its view that upward mobility inherently involved the exploitation of the lower economic strata. Borrowing rules of nomenclature from Restoration theatre, variety afterpieces, for example, often featured arriviste employers sporting surnames such as "Grasp" or "Grab-all." Those to the manor born met undiluted scorn, it was true, but those who climbed from their birth station, variety managers argued, only managed the passage

⁴⁰ Tony Pastor, "In the Bowery," *Since the Soup House Moved Away* (New York: A.J. Fisher, 1874).

⁴¹ "The King of the Monkeys," Tony Pastor Collection, Harry Ransom Humanities Center, University of Texas, Austin.

by forcing others harder to the oars in their stead. Charley Gleason, a variety comedian and singer, popularized Pastor's song "Never Say Die" during the 1870s, the time of Pastor's residence in the Opera House. Gleason opened the tune bemoaning that "many a poor fellow whose talents/ To elevate science would tend/ Is lost to the world's gaze forever" for want of opportunity from the upper classes. These wealthy and oppressive Americans "boast of their wealth and connections," but like Pastor's self-delusional monkeys, "look with contempt upon those/ Of lower degree, quite forgetting/ The means by which they arose."⁴² Another paean to the working class from the same period recalls that the wealthy have "wrecked a bank or two uptown, but that's no new affair/ We read of financiering just like that now everywhere." The news in this profiteering, for Pastor, lay in identifying the victims during the final verse: the wealthy only consolidated the savings they had stripped from the multitudinous yet meager accounts of the workingmen.⁴³ The celebration of class fixity, therefore, also represented a deep-seated fear that rising in class invariably increased the oppression of those at the bottom, in effect limiting opportunity rather than embracing it.

Pastor, who continued to appear as a featured vocalist until shortly before his death in 1908, undoubtedly recognized the unique relationship solo vocalists such as Gleason had with their variety audiences. Usually staged in front of a dropped curtain (to facilitate changes of scenery for larger pieces), such acts placed well-known, popular singers in great proximity to the audience and with very little mediation between the two parties. Indeed, the songs usually depend upon direct address. As with "King of the Monkeys," the lyrics also frequently made deft and shifting use of pronouns in the alignment of performer and spectator. Paying particularly close

⁴² Tony Pastor, "Never Say Die," *Since the Soup House Moved Away* (New York: A.J. Fisher, 1874).

⁴³ Untitled song, Tony Pastor Collection, Harry Ransom Humanities Center, University of Texas, Austin.

attention to the unerring deployment of third-person plural, soloists in class-oriented songs, their backs figuratively against the wall (represented by the curtain), excoriated “they” who would deny others liberty and economic opportunity.

Such barbed criticism played well to Pastor’s patrons, of course, but it also kept variety owners as neighborhood-bound and often as impoverished as their clientele. The post-bellum years, as we shall see, were choked with financial panic upon financial panic. Dependence upon a single patron population (and the one with the fewest ready dollars for the box office) placed the variety theatre in a perilous position. In the end, were it to survive and grow, Pastor’s theatre and those like it had to find a way to expand beyond their traditional audience base. However, the decidedly working class bent of much variety material, while promoting solidarity within that group, precluded the type of mass consumption that was driving nearly every flourishing industry following the end of the war. Where other business sectors—from coal to railroad—found staggering returns by providing a service that most citizens made use of in one way or another, the variety theatre had tied its success to only one segment of the population: working class urban males. The well-to-do and the burgeoning white collar population, both of which had excess capital and leisure time, had little reason to attend a ritualistic excoriation of their stations, goals, and taste cultures. Pastor and fellow stock variety company owners, having catered to the political positions and residential locations of the traditional variety audiences, now found themselves unable to expand beyond the fixed location stock company model that was swiftly disappearing from the American theatre. Moreover, an audience composed entirely of working class patrons prevented managers from charging markedly more for the choicest seats; the patrons simply didn’t have the cash to support the shift in consumption values that justified a far higher price for box seats and the like.

Conduct and decorum within the variety hall also militated against wide attendance by members of the middle and upper classes. Sales of alcohol still accounted for a large percentage of many theatres' revenues, creating an audience that often forcefully waded into exchanges with one another and the audience. The tenor of the hall, informed by the direct address favored by showmen such as Pastor and compromised by tongues loosened with drink, remained one of vigorous communal debate, group sing-alongs, jingoistic fervor, and militaristic articulation of class identity. Even Pastor, that champion of the working man who would later bemoan polite vaudeville as "sissy and Frenchified," was forced to admit that "the old variety houses weren't considered nice places at all."⁴⁴ Perhaps most importantly, Pastor's patrons were not only self-segregated by economic station but by gender. Variety's reputation for boisterous ribaldry—often with slightly blue material—kept away any women who might have attended, in part because other male family members forbade their exposure to the variety atmosphere. The male-only audience composition, combined with the working class orientation, therefore found only a small segment of the overall national population likely to find its way into the ticket queue. For all these reasons, evidence of the very class and gender consciousness that had forged so invigorating a relationship between the variety theatre and its devotees—low ticket prices; the reflection of working class consciousness in content; and an interactive, masculinized ethos that also valued the consumer as producer—was now threatening variety's survival.

Economic necessities of the 1870s forced variety to broaden its audience base from the male-dominated crowds of the Civil War era to the capital-laden families that would come to distinguish the emerging middle class. As Brooks McNamara has

⁴⁴ Tony Pastor qtd in Charles Somerville, "Tony Pastor, Starting as the Youngest Actor, Hailed This Week as the Oldest on the Stage," 1908, Tony Pastor Collection, Harry Ransom Humanities Center, University of Texas at Austin, Austin, Texas.

noted, the end of the war emptied many urban areas of the North (New York City, in particular) of the thousands of troops that had supported the often bawdy, frankly nationalistic fare offered by the concert saloons.⁴⁵ Managers such as Pastor had already drawn deeply upon the well of urban male society in populating their audiences. The replacement of thousands of departed customers demanded that, absent any ability to incite fresh armed conflict, variety hall managers find a manner in which they might sell tickets to urban women and children. Additionally, the panic of 1873 greatly injured urban entertainment, leading to the collapse of legitimate and variety houses across the East Coast.

Convinced of the intrinsic attractiveness and relative cleanness of his material, Pastor, beset by financial concerns for the length of his career, narrowed his focus to the Gordian knot that continued to bedevil variety reformers: women refused to attend because the halls were bastions of aggressive, hyper-masculine comportment; males continued to behave in such fashion because the absence of any “ladies”—the “advertising waitresses” fell well outside this category—inversely marked the space as androcentric. Variety, he found with evident relish, lay ripe for the manager “who could disentangle it from cigar-smoking and beer-drinking accompaniment” and “get the ladies coming to see the show.”⁴⁶ “I knew if I could get the ladies coming to see the shows,” Pastor later said, “that I’d just double the field” of the ticket-buying public. The broadening of the audience to include women and children—perhaps the definitional shift between variety and vaudeville—should therefore not be viewed within the framework B.F. Keith and other turn-of-the-century managers would later provide, one gilded by treacley paeans to American womanhood and the innocence of

⁴⁵ Brooks McNamara, *The New York Concert Saloon: The Devil’s Own Nights* (New York: Cambridge UP, 2002) 27.

⁴⁶ Tony Pastor qtd. in Zellars 123. Tony Pastor qtd. in Charles Somerville, “Tony Pastor, Starting As The Youngest Actor, Hailed This Week As Oldest On The Stage.”

children. Rather, we must come to understand this shift as being almost completely driven by considerations of profit and (in the case of the later magnates) ideations of commercial empire. Female audience members might have been invited to the variety halls under the guise of polite culture, but their inclusion was mandated by their ability to bear capital through the front doors.

Earlier attempts at creating a variety environment hospitable for women constituted little more than thinly disguised attempts to flog their change purses without having to remake the halls or reorganize the business. In 1861, for example, the Broadway Music Hall announced, “A Grand Matinee, every Saturday afternoon at 2 o’clock, for the accommodation of Ladies and Children, on which occasion the bars will be closed, and no liquor or cigars will be sold or permitted to be used in the theatre.” Another popular New York hall, the Canterbury, advertised a “Ladies Matinee every Saturday when all choice Gems of the evening will be given.”⁴⁷ Additionally, one must note that such “family” matinees—for children were presumed to be necessary (and delightfully, paying) adjuncts to their mothers—did not replace existing shows. Rather, the programs were grafted onto the previous schedule as a rather feeble effort to make salable what had previously been but “idle time” for the house. These initial crude attempts thus filled empty time with already contracted acts in a physical structure stripped of offending behavior but largely untouched in every other respect. From an economic standpoint, theatre managers could ask for no better means of augmenting their usual weekly receipts. Such efforts were not entirely unsuccessful. The reputation of the variety hall in the 1870s was markedly better than those borne by its predecessors, such as the 1850s Memphis “free-and easies” (i.e.,

⁴⁷ qtd. In Parker Zellers, “Cradle of Variety: The Concert Saloon” (*Educational Theatre Journal* 20, December 1968) 581.

concert saloons) in whose “wine rooms” Tennessean libertines could “fraternize with the dancing girls.”⁴⁸

Yet such efforts ultimately ran hard aground on the nineteenth-century constructions of femininity and the woman’s place in the public sphere.⁴⁹ Though many businesses continued to base themselves in a single structure with the family dwellings, latter nineteenth-century urban society increasingly visualized the home as a place that only briefly housed the male; in it, he lived, but no longer worked.⁵⁰ Magazines such as *Godfrey’s* and *The Household* codified this new distinction by marketing themselves to a new group of female subscribers. The journals, in turn, perpetuated the feminized domestic sphere by soliciting and answering questions regarding decoration, furniture arrangement and suitable entertainment within the home.⁵¹ While men certainly smoked and drank within the confines of their own houses, as they did within the variety halls that filled the interstitial period between work and family, homes began to become formally constructed as locations that would counter the baser impulses that Tocqueville had labeled the “vast egoism” of the American male. Introducing the middle class female spectator to a variety hall replete with bars, hazy with smoke, enlivened by prurient humor and served by unmarried “waitresses” remained outside the pale of not only respectability but of possibility: any lady entering such a space would cease to become one, and this erasure of

⁴⁸ Butsch 101.

⁴⁹ I discuss vaudeville’s interaction with gender more fully in Chapter 2 of this dissertation.

⁵⁰ Harvey Green and Mary-Ellen Perry, *The Light of the Home: An Intimate View of the Lives of Women in Victorian America* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983) 93.

⁵¹ It is, of course, reductive to speak of all nineteenth-century women as wholly bound to their role as wives. Many women took advantage of the new employment opportunities offered by the training of female academies and colleges and the new professional roles for which these prepared them to exist within urban society as singles. However, as Nancy Theriot, argues, “The economic structure did not offer a comfortable place to the woman outside of marriage,” marking her as a rarity of the time. In any case, those women laboring long hours outside the home did not often have the leisure time to take advantage of variety’s initial thrusts toward a cross-gender audience, such as matinees. They would, however, come to constitute an important, if minor, segment of later vaudeville’s audience base. Nancy M. Theriot, *The Biosocial Constructions of Femininity: Mothers and Daughters in Nineteenth-Century America* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1988) 40.

respectability cum femininity imperiled the curative effect the domestic sphere could have on the male. In this sense, only by framing the theatre as a type of domestic sphere, later bemoaned by many as the “feminization” of a formerly robust genre, could variety owners license women to this dangerously public location⁵² The interests of the working class, understood as masculine in variety’s discourse, would simply have to give way in the interests of profits.

In most respects, Pastor was the ideal candidate to initiate the necessary reforms. His early variety material certainly held itself to higher standards of decency and public morality than the bluer material for which the genre was noted in its concert saloon and German beer-garden manifestations. Even during his early days at the “444” (The American Theatre at 444 Broadway, 1861-1865), an establishment Laurence Senelick finds comparatively “rowdy,” Pastor viewed the variety hall as an establishment awaiting the shrewd reformer who could frame the entertainment as fit for ladies.⁵³ Sophie Tucker, who would work for Pastor early in her career, included children in her recalculation of Pastor’s motives. Perhaps early in his career, she conjectured, he “figured shrewdly that if you could sell five tickets to a family you made more money than by selling just one.”⁵⁴

Though such financial considerations certainly drove Pastor in his quest to induce women’s attendance, one must not ignore the manager’s very real personal interest in this major segment of mid nineteenth-century American life. The former clown and circus rider, well known for his voracious appetite for adaptable foreign material, kept a cadre of variety artists and writers with European connections on the prowl for material that could play in New York. Far before literary agents existed as

⁵² For a fuller discussion of the outcry against the “demasculinization” of the vaudeville playhouse, see Kibler Chapter 1.

⁵³ Lawrence Senelick, “Pastor, Tony,” *Cambridge Guide to the American Theatre* (1993 ed.).

⁵⁴ Sophie Tucker with Dorothy Giles, *Some of These Days* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Doran & Co., 1945) 46.

such, these scouts complimented Pastor's trove of material with ceaseless mailings of songs and patter back to the States. Pastor eschewed the usual dependence on recommendations from an exclusively male pool of referees, and made great use of those women whose opinions he had come to respect. Lillie Western, for example, a songstress who would appear on the fabled first clean vaudeville bill in 1881, continued to send Pastor both sheet music and her suggestions for proper performance styles during her time in England. Pastor simply reiterated or left untouched many of her suggestions in passing them along to his assistants for adaptation.⁵⁵ Tucker probably comes closest to the truth in her effort to regard the socially progressive man alongside the manager whose finger sought the public's pulse. "Maybe," the song belter writes, "Tony Pastor foresaw this country was going feminist."⁵⁶

Pastor's initial attempts to domesticate the variety hall might more properly be viewed as rather crude bribery. In exchange for their patronage, ladies were offered myriad giveaways: groceries, dishes, coal, and dress patterns, anything that reinscribed their domestic duties upon their patronage. A woman wandering home from the theatre with a husband on one arm and a coal scuttle in the other could hardly be said to have shirked her proscribed roles as wife and mother during an evening of prurient entertainment. Moreover, by marrying products with theatre attendance Pastor linked spectatorship with other modes of reasonable consumption, transforming the female spectator from a visitor to a buyer. Yet these bald-faced attempts at securing female attendance ultimately proved ineffective, as had Pastor's earlier moves toward

⁵⁵ Parker Zellers, Pastor's biographer, suggests that "the showman's reform efforts could have been dictated simply by his "unabashed fondness for the fairer sex," though there is little evidence to support Pastor employing his theatres as private salons. One actress repeated a story years later of Pastor attempting to "wriggle loose" from her embrace following a contract offer. Pastor's grinningly advised her not to "try that act" on his accountant, for "I need him." Though a devoted family man, Pastor comes down to us in most respects as concerned with little else of his personal life beyond the footlights. Zellers 42.

⁵⁶ Tucker 46.

scheduling Saturday ladies' matinees. Attendance throughout the late 1860s and 1870s continued to skew decidedly toward a male-dominated audience.

It appears Pastor ultimately understood that only by expanding the range of his audience into the middle- and upper classes could he finally domesticate the variety hall. Middle- and upper-class patrons were less likely to engage in the rowdiness that marked variety spectatorship; consequently, women would be more likely to become habitués of the more domestic space. As variety—like most nineteenth century theatres genres—was still largely a neighborhood enterprise, however, Pastor's "refinement" of the form demanded a location that already carried with it at least the patina of decorousness and upper-class commerce with which Pastor wished to associate his efforts.. Vaudeville's mythology, in an understandable search for a point of origination, lauds Pastor's opening night at his new 14th St. theatre in 1881. In part, the location itself signaled something startling and new for variety. 14 St., considered almost the boundary of civilization in the street grid-making Commissioners' Plan of 1811, had become a bustling place of culture and capital by the time of Pastor's move. Macy's made its home there, as did Best & Co. and Tiffany's, each an undeniable den of high-class commerce for the well-to-do.⁵⁷ In 1881, Pastor therefore did not simply

⁵⁷ Rowland Macy, the founder of the chain of stores that still bears his name, provides an interesting commercial counterpart to Pastor. Like the showman, he began in a modest state, spending his early career as a sailor. Leaving the sea, he founded a small dry shop in Boston. Like Pastor, Macy was lauded at his death for having advanced through "foresight and discretion." As with Pastor, Macy bowed to the supreme power of class-based urban geography in building his empire. His 1870s expansion to the Broadway block that Pastor would later join confirms the era's unquestioned co-dependency between the "right" clientele and the "right" part of the city. Yet Macy did not simply migrate a single enterprise from location to location, as did Pastor, but instead embraced the corporate chain model that B.F. Keith and E.F. Albee would later bring to vaudeville. As each new location meant an additional store to sell his goods, Macy, like the later vaudeville magnates, also provided an economy of scale that furthered his profits. As well, his move to Broadway lent the entire brand of "Macy's" a firmer association with higher taste cultures through a single store. Validation by the upper economic class then flowed, as if by peristalsis, from the crown jewel of the chain to its lesser, if more established, individual stores. The trick for Macy, in other words, was not, like Pastor, simply moving from 6th Ave. to Broadway, but allowing those inside the four walls at the 6th Ave. store to *feel* a bit more as if they were on Broadway precisely because Macy now had succeeded in opening a store at the latter location. Conversely, Pastor, whose business model was founded on his personal presence as the authenticating element for the enterprise, was simply unable to open theatre in multiple locations. Read

relocate his theatre but invited himself into the inner sanctum of Manhattan's flourishing swell set. Viewed in this light, Pastor's early attempts to render variety respectable foundered, in large part, because the neighborhood failed to provide him a large enough segment of middle class audience members to sanctify his efforts.

Many historians neglect the importance of this change in locations in their tracing of vaudeville's "evolution" from variety, preferring instead to follow Pastor's absorption with better publicity or Keith-Albee's tales of less prurient material. (It is unsurprising that each of these views prettily frames the managers giving them loudest and longest voice.) Douglas Gilbert, who rightly holds that Pastor's effort in this regard "was mainly (and frankly) for profit," nevertheless contends that the 14th St. opening represents an "innovation" in form and content: "a straight, clean variety show."⁵⁸ Laurence Senelick reiterates this presumption. "Even door prizes of turkeys, hams and bags of flour" at the previous houses, he decides, "were insufficient to attract a God-fearing public" prior to Pastor's move to 14th St.⁵⁹

Such positions fail to satisfy in at least two respects. First, the fixation upon 1881 obscures the degree to which efforts at respectability had proceeded apace at the "444," Opera House, and 585 Broadway theatres. For at least fifteen years, Pastor had, in one form or another, invited the public to inspect his show for violations of

in this light, Pastor's preference for localized performance and famous resistance to the nationalizing of variety performance may be read as simply the inevitable outcome of his continuing his career as a performer even after he became a theatre owner. A "Macy's" could exist wherever the sign and an atmosphere befitting "fancy dry goods" was present; no theatre could rightly be called "Pastor's" unless the man himself could speak to his audience every night. In a turn that would certainly have pleased the frequently self-righteous Pastor, the twenty-first century's Macy's appears to have surrendered to his point regarding the importance of local flavor. Localization is now a key component of Macy's strategic formula for continued growth and success. Announced in early 2008, it's "My Macy's" program seeks to "ensure that each and every Macy's store is 'just right' for the customer who shops in that location. As we provide for more local decision-making in every Macy's community, we will be tailoring our merchandise assortments, space allocations, service levels, visual merchandising and special events store-by-store." "Rowland H. Macy, Merchant; Obituary Notes," *The New York Times*, 31 Mar. 1877. "Growing Through Localization," Macy's, Retrieved 04 Sep 2008: <http://www.macysinc.com/AboutUs/Macys.aspx>.

⁵⁸ Gilbert 113.

⁵⁹ Senelick "Pastor, Tony."

public decorum. Though alcoholic drinks continued to be served in the “precincts” of the theatre, Pastor had presented clean shows at the ladies’ matinees, enforcing prohibition within the hall and banning cigar smoking. As well, the scripts of Pastor’s afterpieces—many bearing revisions in his own hand—make it clear that even relatively inoffensive words such as “hell” had met with death by blue pencil for some years prior to the 1881 move. In 1876, five years before the supposed beginning of clean vaudeville, a postbill assured his visiting public that the evening shows mirrored the ladies’ shows in their chasteness.⁶⁰ Finally, the image laid out in the popular 1881 scenario represents the dynamic between manager and audience as involving constant parties, as if the same ready public tasted the nascent attempts at clean vaudeville in the Bowery in the 1860s, on Broadway in the 1870s and finally in the financial center of New York in the 1880s.

Only when we revisualize Pastor’s geographical relocations as moves involving new audiences and new decades, as well as new buildings, do we gain a better understanding of vaudeville’s birth from variety. In essence, what Pastor seems to have discovered is that the very audience that had provided him with a consistency of patronage that allowed him, over many years, to hone his method of presentation now hampered his ability to be embraced by a better paying and mixed-gender audience. While Pastor certainly took the structure and variety of the working class theatres uptown, he also necessarily abandoned his beloved “lower ten thousand” in the move. It took the sanctifying power of the middle class to allow variety, in the form of polite vaudeville, to finally rise in the 1890s as the national form of popular entertainment. Working class audiences continued to enjoy the rougher-hewn “v’riety” during the refinement and flowering of polite vaudeville in the 1880s, but the form that came to stand astride the national landscape by the late 1890s is best

⁶⁰ qtd. in Zellers 56.

understood as an amalgam that tempered the more Rabelaisian aspects of Pastor's Bowery efforts by plunging them into the more tepid pools of middle class attendance and consideration. Ironically, Pastor, in his campaign to spread the gospel of refined working class variety, finally found success only when he abandoned the clientele that had so long fueled his work.

Given that earlier variety theatres such as the "444" and (to a lesser extent) 585 Broadway unapologetically expressed themselves as seated in the desires of the working class, the opening of the 14th St. theatre therefore signals an embrace of the emerging middle class on the part of variety entertainment. It proved to be a population ready to embrace not only his performances but also his evolving public personae. Pastor's reputation as a champion of family entertainment—genuine, if self-crafted—certainly traveled with him during his rise from sawdust arenas to the opulent purpose-built vaudeville theatres of the Gilded Age. Even before the twenty-seven year tenure that would make him the "Impresario of 14th Street," Felix Isman reports, both audiences and performers acknowledged Pastor as "the great man of the variety stage"⁶¹ Additionally, his rise from the lower economic stratum appears to have actually augmented his standing within the emerging middle class, marking him as one who had fought the difficult battles of propriety and morality amidst the roughest and least receptive of peoples. Tucker, almost forty years after her former employer's death, still treasured tales she had heard as a child of the "boy prodigy" lifted from obscurity through the sheer strength of his having "the right idea" for the times.⁶²

Like later showmen, Pastor understood that the middle class conceptualized the public sphere as one in which women might operate as the guardians/tokens of propriety for society as a whole. This suited Pastor the businessman quite nicely. As

⁶¹ Felix Isman, *Weber and Fields: Their Tribulations, Triumphs and Their Associates* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1924) 30.

⁶² Tucker 46.

women required escorts to the theatre, the middle class assured the variety hall of at least doubling its audience pool. Pastor depended on such ritualized conjoining—men to women for respectability, women to men for safety and patronage—when he made the transition to the 14th St. Theatre. During the opening week of the new theatre he emphasized in a newspaper advertisement that, in “catering to the ladies,” the 14 St. establishment, while continuing to stage burlesque and farces, would also be “presenting for the amusement of the cultivated and aesthetic Pure Music....”⁶³ Pastor remained insistent throughout his life that the 1881 opening represented no sea change in his performances, but simply gave him a chance to expand his ticket base with a population he had already been serving, if in its absence:

I knew variety acts were clean, and would be interesting to the ladies.... I announced with placards in the newspapers that I'd let ladies in free that were accompanied by men -- as many ladies as any one man wanted to bring. Families surrounded fathers, sweethearts clamored to their beaux, and along came the older men and the young fellows, led by the noses by the old ladies, and the young ladies, all dying to see the variety show. And once inside, they saw it wasn't terrible, and wouldn't make them blush....⁶⁴

The tenor of his acts, however, had changed throughout the years. The quickest perusal of Pastor's early variety afterpieces, for example, reveals a depth and complexity of political commentary considered inappropriate for a mixed-gender audience. Though, as we shall see, the idealization of the female audience member as censor rose to heights of Orwellian calculation at vaudeville's zenith of popularity, an examination of Pastor's afterpieces clearly demonstrates that however one might parse

⁶³ Ad for “Tony Pastor's New Fourteenth-Street Theatre,” *Clipper*, XXIX, 29 Oct. 1881.

⁶⁴ Tony Pastor qtd. in Somerville.

his statements or judge his motives—a grasping for the family purse or the provision of a family haven—he systematically began to purge much of the keen political analysis and scathing social commentary that had once been his stock in trade. Where scalding dissections of American proto-imperialism had once rung out, milder patriotic ditties filled the auditorium. Where adept critiques of self-engorging industry had flowered, twaddle about romance lined the stage. Pastor welcomed women into the audience, but accompanied that proffered hand with a desiccation of material content. On one hand, remembrances such as Tucker’s, which frame the manager as an early feminist, and Pastor’s lengthy and unusual history of employing female material scouts would seem to speak against a reading of this shift as motivated primarily by misogyny; clearly, the showman had an appreciation for the intellectual acuity and canny showmanship of women. However, he also appears to have bowed to injurious cultural tropes regarding women’s intellect in stripping his uptown theatres of their most bracing and hard-hitting content. Though vaudeville would abet Progressive reforms in areas such as gender pay equity and women’s suffrage, it is undeniable that, in this regard, it limped, rather than strode, across the national landscape. As well, the earlier playlets centered on a predictable cast of working-class characters, a far cry from the displays of European ladies’ fashion that would later promenade across his stages. Finally, extant variety pieces contain some mild profanities (e.g., “hell”) and jokes (touting, for example, the benefits of polygamy) that almost certainly would have been stricken by the time of the 1881 “clean bill.” Despite Pastor’s protestations to the contrary, some contemporary sources suggest that at least part of the earlier variety shows’ appeal rested in the slightly “racy” quality that took the boards.⁶⁵

⁶⁵ Zellers 41-46.

If Pastor had already left his heirs in the developing polite vaudeville one great boon—entrance to both female patronage and the middle class—his two other contributions, a variegated audience and a rebellious ethos that harkened back to his days in the sawdust circle, would prove the richer gifts. They were also the contributions that allowed the vaudeville playhouse to remain an interrogating, celebratory, and nettlesome voice within American culture for the next several decades. To his credit (and as we shall see, his financial benefit), Pastor did not seek to completely reinvent variety upon his move. Indeed, the famous “first clean bill” demonstrates that the enterprise retained much of the vigorousness and diversity of taste cultures that had marked variety during the 1860s and 1870s:

1. Frank McNish: “Low comedy” acrobat.
2. Ferguson & Mack: “Rough” Irish act—song, dance, and slapstick.
3. The Leland Sisters: Song and dance duo—noted for “their demureness and charm and their dainty costume changes.”
4. Lester & Allen: Eccentric Blackface duo—slapstick and patter comedy, song, and dance
5. The French Twin Sisters: “Class” act—singers with “interesting costume changes.”
6. Lillie Western: Cross-dressing musician—concertina, banjo and xylophone.
7. Ella Wesner: Male Impersonator (headliner).
8. Dan Collyer: Character/patter comedian and singer.

Two of the acts, Ferguson & Mack and Lester & Allen, contained a good deal of comic violence. The former duo ended their routine with Mack sinking a hatchet into Ferguson’s skull; they exited the stage with the weapon still protruding from the trick wig. Lester and Allen’s routine ended with a boxing match fought with inflatable

bladders; for a climax, they beat the properties man off the stage. Immediately following each of these acts, however, were “sister” acts (few actually were) based upon demureness, charm, daintiness, and fashionable costumes. And in theatre that would achieve its fame by creating new legions of female variety patrons, two of the acts played with gender: Western—previously mentioned as one of Pastor’s foreign material scouts—played a variety of instruments while wearing men’s clothing; Wesner, the male impersonator and headliner, played a tipsy English dandy in a barbershop.⁶⁶

Pastor clearly retained much from variety that would seem at odds with the decorousness he proclaimed to be at the heart of his new theatre’s “amusement of the cultivated and aesthetic”: physical violence; gross ethnic stereotypes; drunken characters; and a wild admixture of skills and taste cultures. Additionally, vaudeville, unlike other entertainments deemed acceptable by the middle and upper classes, embraced a variety structure that was wholly familiar to and consonant with the lineage of working class entertainments. Partly because of this retention vaudeville would prove highly attractive to the working class that had supported and developed its forbearer, variety.⁶⁷ It appears that such decisions allowed Pastor to retain portions of his former working-class neighborhood audiences after his move, a significant feat in an urban market in which attendance was usually guided by the proximity of one’s

⁶⁶ Gilbert 114-118.

⁶⁷ Parker Zellers, Pastor’s biographer, plays down the extent to which Pastor was forced to rebuild his audience after each move, stressing that, unlike others who sought more respectable climes for the variety arts, he managed to bring a fair amount of his previous fan base along for the trip. Elements of Zellers’ thesis are reasonable: Pastor did have a famously loyal and enthusiastic base of working-class patrons. No doubt many of them made the trek to 14th St. to follow the showman whose work now gained citywide acclaim. Indeed, the continued presence of working-class material and stars familiar to the Bowery and “444” playhouses makes it plain that, for Pastor, the transition from theatre to theatre entailed continued attendance by some of his former clients. Absent any hard data, however, it seems reasonable to assume that the 14th St. Theatre, though far more heterogeneous than other theatres of its time, was primarily patronized by the middle-class patrons who lived close to the house. (This tendency would change as corporate vaudeville became more practiced at citywide promotion and as public transportation and safety improved.) Working-class patrons were an element of the 14th St. theatre, certainly, but by no means the dominant force in the dark. Zellers 71.

residential neighborhood to the particular theatre. In one sense, this was a prescient business decision. Developing a form salable to many of variety's patrons—more numerous if less wealthy than their new compatriots in the dark—was of paramount importance in ensuring vaudeville's flourishing as a national commercial enterprise. The upper- and middle-classes alone could never have supported an enterprise as far-flung and voracious for spectators as vaudeville would prove to be.⁶⁸

Vaudeville would never be an idyllic meeting place of classes, ethnicities, races, and genders. Attendance continued to be regulated, in part, by the location of the theatre and the cost of the ticket (as well as the language of performance). Yet the broadening of audience enabled by Pastor's re-location proved far more able to and successful at embracing broad swaths of the nation's populations than any of its competing forms of entertainment. Never before had so many members of different taste cultures, economic classes, and genders been publicly gathered for mutual purpose. (Even the attendants of the era's Protestant churches, worshippers in those sancta of "true 'nuff Americans," were quite often divided across various churches by the cost of pew rental.) This newly diversified audience—middle and upper-classes

⁶⁸ William Taylor, in his provocative analysis of the spirit of "Gotham," that peculiar mode of self-creation actualized after the turn-of-the-century in New York City, accounts for the trekking audiences as would now help to ensure the success of the 14th St. playhouse. By the late nineteenth century, New York City had begun to radically remake the idea of the city center, shifting the metropolitan core away from its traditional center of city hall or town market. In "a striking transformation—one could call it a revolution," Taylor argues, the city, abetted by showmen like Pastor, "developed an unanticipated inclination to locate its entertainment industries where they were most accessible—and conspicuous." Pastor depended upon this change. In advertising for a sub-lessee for the 14 St. property while he toured in the summer and early fall of 1881, he noted that his new house was "unsurpassed in location, being of convenient access by three lines of elevated railway [and] two lines of crosstown cars...." Pastor's 1881 relocation from 585 Broadway may be viewed as the first clear signal that the American neighborhood variety theatre, one that routinely based its offerings on the local clientele and enmeshed itself as deeply within the fabric of the local milieu as the corner grocery or local parish, would have increasingly little place in the days of nationalistic anthems and corporate entertainment. While local flavor and dependency upon native audiences would not entirely disappear from the variety stage—in many ways, local flavor continued to be the strongest bolt in even late vaudeville's quiver—there is little doubt that Pastor's 1881 move signals a lessening of its importance. William R. Taylor, *In Pursuit of Gotham: Culture and Commerce in New York* (New York: Oxford UP, 1992) 106-107. for "Tony Pastor's New Fourteenth Street Theatre," *Mirror*, VI (Aug. 5, 1881) 12.

licensed to attend by location and decorum, working class encouraged to attend through familiarity—therefore created a heterogeneous assemblage at the historical cusp of Progressivism.

This was particularly important for the success of the era's reforms, such as improvements in urban sanitation and public education, because such efforts demanded an investment of capital, political muscle, and public attention from the members of the rapidly increasing middle class. Though the reforms themselves most dramatically raised the fortunes of the working class, the efforts—sometimes nearly religious crusades and sometimes calculating increases in civic efficiency—were largely led by members of the middle-class, that group that definitionally owed its very existence to widening a separation from the poor and poorly educated.

So gaping was this fissure at times that muckraking journalists and social crusaders alike frequently engaged in investigations that breathlessly mixed private investigation, amateur anthropology, and dime-novels. Reporter Nellie Bly's undercover self-commitment to an insane asylum for the destitute remains the most famous example of this re-fusion of classes. This most notable effort, however, was only representative of a larger sense that the middle-class, in its legitimization, had surrendered any functional social connection to those left behind: immigrants, the poor, and working women. In 1903, writer Marie van Horst argued that attempting to help a deprived individual or oppressed group was not possible until one had become intimate with "this unknown class." Lacking this acute sociability, members of elevated social standing and acceptable means were destined to regard the disenfranchised as did "the financiers who, for their own material advancement, use the laborer as a means, and the philanthropists who consider the poor as objects of charity, to be treated sentimentally...." Van Horst roundly dismissed the power (and suspected the motives) of either of these aforementioned parties in the struggle toward

equity, in great part because they steadfastly rejected the organic knowledge of Other and life condition she found so essential to social and economic aid. No true help could arise over a horizon; it must instead stride through the midst of the people themselves, familiar with their stories, and attuned to the cadences of their walk, breath, and cries. Mirroring Tarbell's (literal) commitment to the cause, van Horst therefore assumed the identity of "Bell Ballard," a single, working woman, and took a job under an abusive supervisor in a shoe factory. Her sister later did time in a pickle factory. The subterfuge was necessary, Marie van Horst later argued, precisely because her comfortable life permitted her few opportunities for becoming familiar with those whom she would aid. Moreover, she found, such depth of acquaintance was essential for bettering the social and economic conditions of "the unknown class:" In the succeeding work, some of which was initially published serially in that Progressive stalwart *McClure's*, Marie van Horst argues:

It is evident that, in order to render practical aid to this class, we must live among them, understand their needs, acquaint ourselves with their desires, their hopes, their aspirations, their fears. We must discover and adopt their point of view, put ourselves in their surroundings, assume their burdens, unite with them in their daily effort. In this way alone, and not by forcing upon them a preconceived ideal, can we do them real good....⁶⁹

⁶⁹ For their trouble, the van Horst sisters found themselves remonstrated by the loudest lion of Progressivism, Theodore Roosevelt himself. Having read an early serialization of their investigation in *McClure's*, the president complained in a letter to the authors that, though he empathized with the plight of single, working women, he was concerned that too strong "a desire to be 'independent'—that is, to live one's life purely according to one's own desires," might lead to "race suicide" through a failure to have children. Such an individual, cautioned the father of six, is in effect a criminal against the race, and should be an object of contemptuous abhorrence by all healthy people." Mrs. John [Bessie] van Horst and Marie van Horst, *The Woman Who Toils, Being the Experiences of Two Gentlewomen as Factory Girls* (New York: Doubleday, Page, & Co., 1903) 2. Theodore Roosevelt qtd. in van Horst ii.

The middle-class' recession to a place of little more than tangential awareness of and empathy for working-class patrons, those folks who had supported early variety and would aid the triumph of its successor, vaudeville, through continued patronage in the cheap seats, therefore crippled the middle-class' ability to help at all.

Pastor's increasingly midtown relocations in 1865, 1875, and 1881 combated the late-nineteenth century tendency toward class factionalism as represented in entertainment choices. This would seem, on its face, an odd claim. Pastor's pursuit of tonier crowds would appear to not only acknowledge but to validate the notion of audiences divided into different theatres by class (determined, in this case by geography). Though members of his former Bowery and lower Broadway audiences remained loyal to "their Tony," more expensive tickets and a lengthier commute to the theatre did make it less likely that Pastor's later theatres would be dominated by the working class. He was, after all, physically removing the theatre from those who had adored him, all in the pursuit of "respectability" for his theatrical form.⁷⁰ Yet some audience members from his working class houses patronized the new locations; working class audience members nearby the new theatres also added themselves to the mix.

Evidence of this continued working class patronage in ritzier playhouse locations is established in the lengthy record of complaints against those in their gallery, those seats whose low cost and reputation for rowdiness set them aside for precisely the type of working folks whose daily life drew the sisters van Horst into play-acting. In 1903, twenty years after Pastor's "clean bill" trumpeted the form to the

⁷⁰ Pastor's efforts appear far less motivated by naked desire for profit than those of his contemporaries and successors. Indeed, referring to an audience's approbation as "a fine tonic" and known as an immensely soft touch for a performer in need, Pastor was rumored to have been \$100,000 in debt at his death, much of it incurred because he plunged himself into the red to lease an expensively "high class" theatre. Tony Pastor qtd. in Somerville. "Tony Pastor, Veteran Actor, Is Near Death," *The New York Evening World*, 1113 Aug. 1908.

genteel crowd, one big-time manager complained of a magician whose “almost offensive manner” nevertheless “made a great hit with those who occupied the gallery.”⁷¹ Eight years later, a Baltimore manager complimented the ability of a “real classy artist, using classy material” to “have his work appreciated by the gallery as well as the orchestra floor auditors.”⁷² By the height of vaudeville’s success in the 1910s, the identity of the big-time gallery as the invasive, often crudely managed vantage point of the working class was universally acknowledged by vaudevillians. Pat Rooney II, a fleet footed hooper and scion of one of the genre’s most notable families, found himself pushed through six successive encores by a rowdy 1912 Oakland gallery. It was only when Rooney, whistled and stamped on for a seventh time, explained to the “gall’ry gods” that “the delay meant the act to come was getting paid for the work he was doing” that the laborers relented. “The fellow upstairs,” noted one reviewer, “understands the sorrow of that condition perfectly.”⁷³

There are several reasons for the working class patronage of Pastor’s new theatre and its early successors. First, measured against attendance costs for the legitimate theatre in middle- and upper-class districts, even big-time vaudeville

⁷¹ M. J. Keating, Manager’s Report Boston, Temple Theatre, 16 Mar. 1903, Keith-Albee Collection, University of Iowa, Iowa City.

⁷² Manager’s Report, Baltimore, Maryland Theatre, 09 Jan. 1911, Keith-Albee Collection, University of Iowa, Iowa City.

⁷³ The phenomenon of cross-class attendance, however, was largely unidirectional. I have found no convincing evidence of middle- and upper-class audience members journeying to small-time vaudeville houses in “worse” parts of town at any point after Pastor’s 1881 move. Earlier in the nineteenth century gentlemen of leisure had frequented working class concert saloons, the rum and lager soaked predecessors to the variety hall. The gallivanting swells made their way to the Bowery theatres that one playwright insisted survived by through its bounty of rum, not quality of entertainment. When late-nineteenth century shifts in decorum encouraged public displays of domesticity through family attendance, these upper class spectators began attending the only variety entertainments acceptable for their wives: vaudeville. There was little reason to make the journey across town to save the nickel per ticket, especially when the local theatres in the better neighborhoods usually featured more noted and often more skilled performers. As well, taking one’s family into more dangerous and less socially acceptable environs rather defeated the point of engaging these sanitizing rituals of “clean” entertainment in the first place. Leo Levy, review of the show at the Oakland Orpheum, *Oakland Tribune*, 1912. Edward Harrigan, “Harrigan and Hart Part,” newspaper article, 04 May 1885, Harrigan and Hart Collection, Harry Ransom Humanities Center, University of Texas, Austin.

ultimately maintained ticket prices within the occasional reach of laborers and their families. Near the end of vaudeville's revolutionary decade, the 1880s, *every* seat in Boston's vaudeville palace, the Bijou Theatre, was a dime, a price ten to fifteen times less expensive than the *cheapest* seats in the local legitimate house.⁷⁴ Multiple daily performances (usually "three-a-day" in small time and "two-a-day" in big time) at even the higher-class theatres also meant that shift laborers could attend a diverse assortment of theatres. Managers also recognized the profits ensured by two- and three-a-day's constant availability of inexpensive seats. After all, reasoned the Bijou's owner, all of those dimes and nickels eventually added up to the same dollar per day earned in the legitimate houses. Moreover, the middle-class, who had, as David Nasaw argues, avoided the variety houses and confined their socializing to home, now had a commonly acknowledged venue of proper entertainment to attend on a regular basis.⁷⁵ This was only made possible by Pastor joining his previous proclamations about the cleanliness of the content with a location less sullied by the taint of rowdiness. Between the lesser cost, social sanction, and devotion to high quality, Pastor and his immediate successors created a massively popular theatrical form that housed working-, middle-, and upper-classes nightly with the same four walls. For all of these reasons, vaudeville, and not the expensive legit, prurient burlesque, or low-humor minstrelsy, became the theatrical seat for discussions of the common weal during the Progressive era.

Vaudeville, the era's most well-attended public entertainment, was therefore crucial in providing the cross-class familiarity that Progressives journalists, tripping over one another to live among and describe "the real people," argued would legitimize and fuel subsequent reform efforts. While the working class could come

⁷⁴ David Nasaw, *Going Out: The Rise and Fall of Public Amusements* (New York: Basic Books, 1993) 21.

⁷⁵ Nasaw 15.

into contact with (and from the gallery, often overrule the desires of) its economic betters, the middle- and upper-classes each gained an important element of awareness that would aid Progressive reforms. For the middle-class spectator, vaudeville attendance provided, to borrow the words of Mary van Horst, an opportunity “to place[one’s] intellect and sympathy in contact” with those who most suffered from lack of medical treatment, ill-equipped school houses, and illiteracy. Robert Wiebe argues persuasively that self-interest, more than altruism, drove the hunger for social and economic reform. The new middle-class, after all, was not composed of those fallen from the ranks of the wealthy, but populated with those in the midst of the multi-generational climb from the Bowery to Park Avenue. “Far reaching social changes” aiding those most imperiled by the top-down oppression of Gilded Age magnates, notes Wiebe, provided these middle-class Americans with assurances that they might continue “to pursue their ambitions....”⁷⁶

The era’s wealthy, in contrast, had seemingly little to gain from such reforms, inasmuch as the lack of collective bargaining, sanitation codes, and stock market regulation allowed for a more unfettered exercise of their power. As this potency waxed, however, those who Pastor had belittled as the “collar and cuff-i-ty/not the right stuff-i-ty” crowd became dangerously distanced from those whose continued productivity fueled the oppressive wealth in the first place.⁷⁷ As a result, writes early-twentieth century historian Walter Weyl, the Progressive era rich “cannot conceive how a society growing in wealth can simultaneously grow in discontent, and it regards all subterranean rancor as a lack of gratitude.”⁷⁸ Such ignorance and disdain encouraged socialism, the most frequently demonized political movement of the era,

⁷⁶ Robert Wiebe, *The Search for Order, 1877-1920* (New York: Hill & Wang) 165.

⁷⁷ Tony Pastor (lyrics), “The Boy of To-Day,” Tony Pastor Collection, Harry Ransom Humanities Center, University of Texas, Austin.

⁷⁸ Walter Weyl, *The New Democracy: An Essay on Certain Political and Economic Tendencies in the United States* (New York: MacMillan, 1913) 153.

hardly the endgame envisioned by the era's plutocrats. As well, the initial absence of the wealthy from organized reform meant that those with "the inherent resources—the critical positions in the local economy, the money, and the prestige—to command some sort of response from the government" were not engaged in the struggle.⁷⁹ For the vast majority of Progressive reformers who sought a reformation, rather than a rejection, of market capitalism, the enlistment of this class became crucial. Yet as Wiebe argues, the most effective and willing volunteers from the hegemony were those who arose as "newly self-conscious businessmen." By placing the working-class narratives and songs of vaudeville in the residential district of the comfortable, well-to-do, and struggling alike; and by enabling attendance by spectators from across various taste cultures and economic classes, the reforms of Tony Pastor provided one of the chief venues to provide for the success of Progressivism.

Tellingly, Pastor's new theatre, in successfully encouraging attendance by women, also rent the veil that had separated "this dainty lot" from men during the evening's entertainment. Vaudeville was certainly not responsible for the momentous role played by women, too often limned as socially and politically inert in the early nineteenth-century, in Progressive reform. One must note, however, that it was in vaudeville that a large number of women from all taste cultures, ethnicities, and economic classes regularly encountered non-didactic discussion and presentation of social problems that had previously been set aside, in public fora, as the near exclusive domain for male digestion: labor strife, immigration matters, intemperance, consolidated capital, etc. The shared space of the theatre thus helped to enable the organization and public discussion on the part of women that would abet reforms as varied as the settlement house and the provision of safe drinking water in low income neighborhoods.

⁷⁹ Wiebe 174.

The material at Pastor's 14th St. theatre, however, also acknowledged the new patrons through fewer expressions of overt sympathy with the working class and a noticeable lessening of political commentary. Formerly, variety, particularly in its afterpieces, ethnic songs, and comic monologues, routinely excoriated the waxing (and, it was presumed, oppressive) corporate business model.⁸⁰ The managers who would inherit vaudeville from Pastor, dependent upon the developing class of professionals for the form's national spread (and themselves often corporate employees), would prove more wary of engaging bourgeois malfeasance in too frontal an assault. The "uptown swells" lambasted by Pastor throughout the late-1860s and early 1870s, for example, had a far easier time of it in the midtown vaudeville playhouse.⁸¹ As well, political commentary, formerly the thematic skeleton upon which characterizations and scenarios were made flesh, waned noticeably after the 1881 opening. The variety house had relentlessly pursued President Grant and his cabinet for their unethical dealings. By 1903 a Philadelphia vaudeville manager would assure his corporate headquarters that parodies of the president were "something which we do not [allow] in any form in this house."⁸²

Ominously, women, who had been invited into the variety house as bearers of culture and capital, now became the excuse behind much of the censorious impulse that would grip corporate vaudeville in its maturity. Where variety had engaged questions of politics, proto-imperialism, and natural rights with something near impunity within its four walls, vaudeville "pampered" (to use Alison Kibler's term) its female patrons with both modern amenities (e.g., filtered water, cushioned chairs) and

⁸⁰ I discuss this in detail in Chapter 2.

⁸¹ In part, this move away from promulgation of working class values resulted from the shift in the bill's structure. As variety began to lose the lengthy narrative afterpiece from its stock company days, the genre simply had less room for the expostulating and summary tableaux that had fired the imaginations of its earlier audiences.

⁸² M. J. Keating, Manager's Report Boston, Temple Theatre, 29 Jun. 1903, Keith-Albee Collection, University of Iowa, Iowa City.

more apolitical fare. The restiveness and frequently spontaneous interactivity of the variety hall was understood to be upsetting to the more refined and delicate female constitution. Indeed, spontaneity and interactivity became newly conceptualized as traits that were at once masculine and lower class. The presence of what Kibler labels the “naïve child” (i.e., adult woman) became itself justification for the fitfully successful efforts to purge political material from the vaudeville stage.⁸³ When in 1910 vaudeville critic Norman Levy bemoaned the thirty year-old nomenclatural shift from “variety” to “vaudeville,” occasioned by women as a significant presence in the audience, his own word choice is telling. Variety, he contended, was a “sturdy American name.” Vaudeville, however, was replete with “fancy trimmings” and lived under an assumed “fancy French title.”⁸⁴ The 14th St. theatre, that key venue for forming a heterogeneous audience and setting vaudeville on its way to popular success was, for some, therefore also the site at which the robust working-class playhouse became a neutered being, defined by its lack and foreign impotency.

Modern readings of Pastor’s reforms usually toggle between the hagiography that Pastor himself promulgated (wherein he appears as a well-meaning, if simple, crusading demi-prude) and a Marxian insistence that his recasting of variety masked either economic desperation or otherwise bald avarice. However one might choose to divine Pastor’s true intentions, what remains indisputable (and for the purposes of Progressive reforms, lamentable), is that he greeted the new wave of female and middle class spectatorship with compromised fare. The reproach that met the “feminized” vaudeville of the Keith-Albee empire, like Levy’s, miscast women in the audience as the villains of the piece, but did correctly identify the chilling effects of

⁸³ Alison Kibler, *Rank Ladies: Gender and Cultural Hierarchy in American Vaudeville* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1999) 46.

⁸⁴ Norman Levy, “The Future of Vaudeville,” magazine article, 1910, Harvard Theatre Collection, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

vaudeville's paternalistic bent. If Pastor invested less public capital than Keith in sanctimonious self-aggrandizement, his sins were perhaps the greater. Keith entered into vaudeville with few allegiances to class struggle of any type. Pastor, in compromising the ideological bent of his early variety work, abandoned the very laborers and struggling families for whom he had served as champion at the very moment when all family members could finally enter the theatre.

Pastor, in the subsequent palmy day of vaudeville, denied changing the acts to any great degree. "There is hardly any difference in method [of performance] between then and now," he insisted. "Variety-vaudeville. The modern doctor coats his drug with a confection and calls it a tabloid."⁸⁵ One must scan Pastor's remembrances with a wary eye, of course. The "little Italian" resisted many of the institutional changes that marked the fully-flowered vaudeville, maintaining a local house when others founded chains and continuing to regard his performers as wandering family members long after such folk had begun organizing against less charitable managers. In vaudeville, that behemoth astride the American cultural scene, Pastor seems to have seen not his progeny, but a somewhat soulless enterprise, one as consumed with profits at the expense of community as any other trust. He therefore strove greatly in his later years to maintain the illusion of an unbroken succession of variety halls. In the interviews given within the last few years of his life one unerringly discerns the conscious construction of a slanted genre history through personal narrative, one that prized his own tastes over those more tepid acts "touched by Keith's anemia."⁸⁶

Like Pastor, B.F. Keith, whose eponymous chain dominated corporate vaudeville, understood well the seamier genres of American popular entertainment. Beginning as a messboy on a tramp steamer, Keith moved on to life as a grifter in the

⁸⁵ Tony Pastor, Newspaper Interview, *The Sun*, 27 Jan. 1907, Tony Pastor Collection, Harry Ransom Humanities Center, University of Texas, Austin.

⁸⁶ Douglas Gilbert, *American Vaudeville: Its Life and Times* (New York: Whittlesey House, 1940) 115.

circus, where he most likely met his future business partner, E.F. Albee. Keith settled in Providence, RI in 1880, toiling as a broom maker before opening a small dime museum in 1883. He displayed none of the compunctions that had governed Pastor's selection of fare, instead embracing a breadth of attractions that can only be described as Barnumesque: variety comics unabashedly played alongside the biggest frog in America, a chicken with a human face, and "Baby Alice: the Midget Wonder."⁸⁷

Keith later recalled this period as "the beginning of my permanent career in the theatricals" but it might be more accurately considered his lengthy (and largely unsuccessful) attempt to arrive upon a profitable formula of public attractions.⁸⁸ In a sense, Keith's early efforts demonstrated a personal hunger for profit that would simply appear in shifting social guises throughout his career. In later years, the wealthy chain owner would attribute his enormous success to a "fixed policy" of display that removed that "feeling of shame" one might have when exiting a place of ill-chosen amusements.⁸⁹ Yet Keith, despite his later claim to have been an atypical dime museum proprietor, displayed acts that would have later been deemed unrespectable in the vaudeville playhouse. Like Barnum, the early master of the dime museum, Keith displayed absolute comfort with the "complex mixture of novelty, piety, pedantry, and outright fraud that spelled success in the dime museum business."⁹⁰ When a later cultural shift would create a new profit center, both Keith's interest and recollections appeared to have shifted in turn.

Indeed, as Robert Snyder notes, though both Keith and Albee arose from "the same world of circuses and dime museums that produced Pastor . . . they were never

⁸⁷ Walter Richard Eaton, "The Wizards of Vaudeville," *McClure's Magazine* 55 (September 1918): 4.

⁸⁸ B.F. Keith qtd. in McLean 20.

⁸⁹ B.F. Keith, "The Vogue of Vaudeville," *American Vaudeville as Seen by its Contemporaries*, ed. Charles W. Stein (New York: Knopf, 1984) 17..

⁹⁰ Brooks McNamara refers to Barnum with this phrase. Brooks McNamara, "'A Congress of Wonders': The Rise and Fall of the Dime Store Museum," *Emerson Society Quarterly* 20 (3rd quarter, 1974): 224.

showmen at heart. They were businessmen.”⁹¹ Snyder makes a fair distinction between the two generations of variety artists, though one might further call upon Barnum, forbearer to them all, as the more complete version of each of his progeny. Pastor shared Barnum’s interest in presenting carefully crafted evenings of “morally uplifting” fare, understanding all the while that the uplift in public morals was ultimately incidental to the rise in managerial fortune. Yet Pastor, who struggled throughout his life to keep his many theatres profitable, lacked Barnum’s keen business sense as a showman. It would be Keith (later joined by Albee) who ultimately understood the manner in which vaudeville, rising in an age of trusts, could consolidate its power around the mantra of respectability.

Keith was little interested in the development of advanced showmanship that drove Pastor. Indeed, Pastor’s office in his final theatre was separated from the stage by but a single door, creating a sanctum in which the manager (who, despite failing health and memory, occasionally appeared in shows) could monitor the laughter that marked an evening. (Crediting this “fine tonic” with lengthening his life, Pastor solemnly informed an interviewer, “If I was robbed of it, I’d get old in a night.”⁹²) Keith displayed little of Pastor’s absorption in either the aesthetics of the genre or the endless experimentation with content to which the native New Yorker devoted much of his time. Instead, Keith, beset by his faltering dime museum, devoted his efforts to tinkering with form and business practices. He had little choice. Keith might have duplicated Barnum’s range of offerings but he did so over forty years after Barnum’s American Museum had opened to record box office. During the interregnum the ruse used by Barnum faltered. No longer could the proprietor recede to the amiable position of docent in a madhouse. Thus, despite Keith’s protestations that the stage at

⁹¹ Snyder 26.

⁹² Tony Pastor qtd. in Somerville.

his dime museum presented only “clean and decent” entertainment, the theatrical offerings inevitably suffered from the tincture of the term “variety.”

Even in the midst of an impassioned defense of the genre in 1882, the year between the opening of Pastor’s 14th St. theatre and Keith’s dime museum, one critic found himself forced to offer what, lamentably, was only too standard an admission. Despite finding “more genuine originality and humor developed on the variety stage and recognized and appreciated by the variety audience than by all the ‘legitimate’ put together,” the reviewer regretfully affirms “that the variety, originality, humor and wit is burthened with a great deal of stupidity and sometimes worse.”⁹³ Keith, who blamed the lingering infamy of variety on what one critic termed the “weird, lurid” aesthetic established by managers in its Bowery heyday, dealt with the problem as neatly as one might wish.⁹⁴ Discarding the disreputable “variety,” he took on the more refined—or in Pastor’s view, more “sissy”—title of “vaudeville.” This nod to encroaching European affectations failed to rescue his business, however, and Keith shifted to a schedule of continuous performances from 10 A.M. to 10 P.M. Still, the drag in attendance threatened the museum. Calling upon an acquaintance from his circus days, Keith welcomed Albee into the faltering concern.⁹⁵

Albee first involved himself as a street shill for Keith’s spieler, interjecting enthusiastic agreement whenever Sam Hogdon, Keith’s talker, paused his bally long enough. Inserting himself as literally the “man on the street,” Douglas Gilbert reports, Albee managed to double the business on the first day during which he operated. Albee’s choice of position—Keith had only asked that he “make [him]self useful”—is instructive. Albee, who would run the Keith-Albee empire in name after his employer’s death, ran it in fact within a few years of joining the initial theatre.

⁹³ “The Variety Theatre.” Newspaper review, 1882, Harvard Theatre Collection, Cambridge, MA.

⁹⁴ John Carboy, John. “Our Managers. Antonio Pastor.” Harvard Theatre Collection, Cambridge, MA.

⁹⁵ Snyder 27.

Various described by former vaudevillian Joe Laurie as Keith's "lord high executioner" and "Richelieu," Albee appears to have intuitively grasped that vaudeville's spread through the middle class would require more than Pastor's ceaseless newspaper protestations of respectability and inoffensiveness. Such advertisements not only cost money—no small matter to a tiny theatre teetering on the edge of insolvency—but retained the whiff of the humbug. In the intervening four decades between Barnum advertising views of George Washington's 160 year-old nursemaid and the opening of Keith's variety house, the public had grown canny in its disentangling of hyperbole from actuality. Indeed, one might argue that Pastor failed to establish an absolute reputation for decency partly because his early avenue of address, the advertisement, became more suspect as the century wore on. Albee's highly revealing choice to shill from within the crowd rather than to spiel in front showed that he recognized that critical support for vaudeville must appear to arise from within the very mass audience it sought to serve. (Ironically, the Keith-Albee chain, no doubt aware of the subversive potential, later militated against the use of plants in the audience.) Though even its designation as the *voix de ville* (or "voice of the city") would seem to speak of a spontaneous popular embrace of fine and decent entertainment, Albee's move gives the lie to any such presumption.⁹⁶ Vaudeville's

⁹⁶ Use of the term "vaudeville" in reference to American variety entertainment antedates the mature genre by several decades. As early as 1841 a house referred to itself as a "vaudeville theatre," initiating several decades during which the term flitted fitfully about variety theatre. Invariably, its presence signaled a managerial attempt to frame his wares as safe for consumption by the general public. In 1852, for example, J.L. Robinson touted his tent show as "the oldest established vaudeville company in the United States." For their pocket change, Robinson promised, patrons would receive only the most "Moral, Novel, and Mirthful" of entertainments. The term was entrenched in the popular consciousness by the late 1880s, though a few, like Pastor, continued to prefer "variety." Despite the objection of nostalgic managers such as Pastor, Keith's renaming of variety itself must be seen as something more than participation in encroaching affectation of all things European. Keith intuitively conceived of high culture in America as the fruit of Tantalus, ever just slightly out of reach through its impenetrability of form and elevated content. If his audience could not exactly parse the phrase, if it sounded slightly "Frenchified" to their ears (to borrow Pastor's condemnation), so much the better. As Leigh Woods has noted, on the heels of "'variety' [that] had grown up as a feature in bars and saloons," the term "vaudeville" practically "savor[ed] of sophistication." The realization of such borrowed class hardly originated with Keith. Keith's use of the term, therefore, drew on a lengthy, though by no means

birth from variety did not, as Pastor claimed throughout his life, represent a moment when an audience cast aside its prejudices and viewed a reputable form too long buried in the ashes of the working class hearth. Instead, the 1880s, during which the concept of vaudeville began to gain acceptance among the “better people,” is little more (and nothing less) than a period during which variety entertainment abandoned one self-generated myth of representation (the sanctity of an entrenched working class) for another (the respectability of a socially and economically ambitious middle class).

Variety’s celebration of labor, while uniform, had been fairly haphazard in its institutionalization. Some, like Pastor, had integrated the ethos into almost every element of the evening, opening with popular aires, continuing through humor aimed at working class concern and ending with afterpiece tableaux that sometimes fantastically combined trumpeting jingoism with acute dissections of America’s proto-imperialist ambitions. Others had bounced madly between bastardizations of European high opera and grossly offensive ethnic humor. Pastor’s claims to offer clean entertainment could never really be taken seriously for variety as a whole, if only because the genre, mirroring in organizational structure what it so admired in individual character, eschewed the type of regimentation, censorship and centralized control that would have permitted the statement to be true. Just as the upper caste characters in a Pastor afterpiece met frustration in their censorial admonishments of mechanics and miners, so did Pastor find his efforts to undergird variety with basic

pervasive, association of “vaudeville” with “clean variety.” Additionally, the nomenclatural break of the 1880s provided many of variety’s longtime critics with a rhetorical backdoor through which they might embrace the increasingly popular “vaudeville” even as they continued to abjure “variety.” The change in genre title allowed Hartley Davis, for one, to simultaneously praise the successor and excoriate the predecessor. “The variety show was an outcast,” he informs his reader in 1905. “Vaudeville is an institution, respected and respectable.” Leigh Woods, “Sarah Bernhardt and the Refining of American Vaudeville,” *Theatre Research International*, Vol. 18, No. 1: 16. Charles Pike Sawyer. “Mirrors of Variety,” *Boston Transcript*, 02 Oct. 1926. Hartley Davis, “In Vaudeville,” *Everybody’s Magazine* (August 1905) 232.

tenets of middle class decency frustrated by the countless variety hall operators who harbored fewer ambitions for the genre.

Pastor himself displayed little interest in the empire building that characterized the national spread of clean vaudeville. Until the end of his days, the manager/performer/writer viewed variety performance as too inextricably bound to the location of the house to foster any realizable national ambitions. Robert Snyder frames the difference between the variety managers and their vaudeville kin nicely. “While Pastor was basically a show-business version of a local Tammany boss,” he argues, Keith and Albee “were kingmakers with national aspirations.”⁹⁷ While Pastor had created the possibility and pioneered the presentational style, it would be left to managers such as Keith, Albee, Proctor, and Beck, magnates such as might be found in their contemporary steel, railway, and cotton industries, to install the new image of variety entertainment in the national consciousness.

Keith and Albee teetered against the edge of bankruptcy even after they furthered vaudeville’s initial reform impulse. In desperation, Albee suggested that his employer attempt to marry the price structure of variety, which often sold tickets at anywhere from a tenth to a quarter of the legitimate theatre’s prices, with light opera, an entertainment Albee felt sure to lure more respectable crowds into a vaudeville house. The duo chose to stage a pirated version of *The Mikado*, a show then taking the stage at several first-class theatres in town. (At the time, Gilbert and Sullivan operettas lacked copyright protection in the United States.) Inquiring of the public why it might “pay \$1.50 when you can see our show for 25c,” the pair retained the continuous format and presented five shows each day.⁹⁸

⁹⁷ Snyder 26.

⁹⁸ Qtd. in Nasaw 20.

It was a radical move on several fronts. First, Gilbert and Sullivan's work was held in universal regard not only for the quality of the product but also for the unimpeachable probity of the original English productions. As Ernest Short notes, "From the first Gilbert and Sullivan determined that no derogatory element should associate itself with their stage work." The Savoy Company management forbade the cross-gender casting that so troubled some Victorians, for example, while insisting that men refrain from wearing tights. These famous efforts to "placate every purist" marched in step nicely with the fomenting Keith-Albee aesthetic.⁹⁹ Second, in pirating *The Mikado* and foregrounding the venue of the theatre, Keith and Albee began the de-emphasizing of content that would, in many ways, continue as a chief distinction between vaudeville and the legitimate theatre. Authorship of content remained paramount in the high arts, creating venues in which one attended not the theatre or the museum but in the words of Cole Porter, to view an O'Neill drama or Whistler's mama. In vaudeville, however, one patronized the house. The variety *Mikado* also married an offering from outside the lower stratum of amusement with prices befitting the display of a baby midget. Keith and Albee were able to afford maintaining the ticket prices at variety levels because of the stripped-down nature of the production, certainly, but also because they persisted in experimenting with something approaching continuous performance. Their *Mikado*, featuring a cast most likely under weekly contracts that did not tie pay to frequency of performance, played five times daily during the 1885 run, ensuring a steady flow of customers against fixed operating costs. It is fair, then, to acknowledge this, the first of the pair's many successes, as the training ground for what would become a vaudeville empire.

Receipts from the show saved the Keith-Albee enterprise. The duo soon began varying the more expensive operettas with variety shows, though they were careful to

⁹⁹ Ernest Short, *Fifty Years of Vaudeville* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1946) 29.

preserve the veneer of morality over the variety offerings. Within two years of the *Mikado* success the Keith-Albee management team leased the Bijou Theatre in Boston; roughly a year after that, the pair took the first step toward what would become its vaudeville empire with the opening of the Gaiety Museum (formerly the Old Dime Museum) in Providence.¹⁰⁰ The Bijou proved astoundingly profitable, despite the nascent chain's insistence that ticket prices remain an egalitarian dime for every seat in the playhouse; nearby legitimate theatres priced their orchestra seats at ten to fifteen times as much.¹⁰¹ It was the beginning of the vaudeville boom. F.F. Proctor, the future "dean of vaudeville" (then an equilibrist touring under the stage name "Fred Levantine") bought his first interest in an Albany theatre in 1886, the same year that Keith-Albee most likely made use of the Bijou. Pastor continued to present highly successful shows at his 14th St. Theatre. The next several years witnessed an exponential increase in the number of notable vaudeville theatres: Keith's Gaiety Opera House, Providence, RI (1888); B.F. Keith's, Philadelphia (1889); Proctor's 23rd Street Theatre, New York City (first as a legitimate house, then with continuous vaudeville in 1892); Keith's Union Square Theater, New York City (1893); and Keith's New Theatre, Boston and Proctor's Pleasure Palace, New York City (1894). Each of these houses tread the path laid by Pastor and employed the means of operation and methods of marketing developed by Keith-Albee.

Yet even after Pastor's relatively early public acclaim for moral entertainment suited to the "best people" and Keith-Albee's articulation of vaudeville as a beast apart from old variety, remembers theatre manager Harlowe Hoyt, "vaudeville was a dubious amusement," often lumped in with burlesque (which was "never mentioned

¹⁰⁰ Sources vary on precisely when the team acquired playing rights in the Bijou. King's *Marquee* claims 1886. Toll agrees, placing it mid-1886. McLean is ambiguous, but seems to favor 1887. Gilbert claims 1885 but compromises his position with an erroneous reporting of continuous vaudeville in the same section. Snyder places the move in 1886, but upon inspection, has simply drawn upon Toll.

¹⁰¹ Nasaw 21.

above a whisper”).¹⁰² “Customers wanted something wholesome,” Hoyt recalls, and sought out fare “to further reassure the churchly and the timid who feared their wrath” that the evening would not violate propriety.¹⁰³ In the face of such mistrust, the managers, who would spend the next several decades tussling for control of what Paul DiMaggio has called “Vaudeville, Inc.,” more or less joined together in crafting a unified reading of turn-of-the-century American variety entertainment as respectable and befitting consumption by the middle class.

The new magnates of vaudeville most clearly institutionalized an overt display of respectability through increasingly ornate theatres. Nowhere was this phenomenon more marked than in the big time houses, the theatres in that stratum of vaudeville dominated by the most successful managers, offering the greatest salaries, and charging the highest prices. The wealthiest managers in big time vaudeville, hungry to counterbalance the socially and politically contentious fare that continued to appear alongside displays of fashionable dresses and trick ponies, tuned in lockstep to the facet of the industry over which they had near total control: the physical environment of the theatre itself. Though Pastor’s 14th St. theatre quickly became one of the cozier

¹⁰² The mature burlesque show made use of a variety format to intersperse strip tease artists with increasingly scatological comedians. Like vaudeville, burlesque grew out of the nineteenth-century’s familiarity with and enjoyment of variety entertainments. Burlesque only toyed with the idea of enfolding itself in “polite culture,” however, preferring instead to found its business on the patrons whose interests in sexuality and bawdiness were no longer served in the former variety house. Most historians date the beginning of American burlesque to 1866, when Lydia Thompson’s dancers took a New York City bow in *The Black Crook*, but the “golden age” of burlesque is usually placed from 1905 into the late 1930s. Like vaudeville, much of burlesque was organized on a national corporate model (with “wheels” replacing “chains” in the terminology). Some burlesque houses, such as the Minsky brothers’ New York City theatres, functioned as stock companies reminiscent of the early nineteenth-century American legitimate theatres. The period from the turn of the century through just after the end of World War I, dominated by the relatively clean Columbia wheel, gave way in the 1920s to the more licentious Mutual wheel. By the mid-1920s, the tease of sexuality promised by early displays of legs had given way to nude tableaux and sophisticated strip tease, shifts that allowed civic authorities to begin to clamp down on theatre owners. Staggered by public outcry and hampered by the increasingly shorter periods granted in burlesque theatre licenses, the form began its quick collapse in the early 1940s with its expulsion from the New York City theatre scene. For the definitive treatment of the genre, see Robert C. Allen, *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and American Culture* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1991). Harlowe R. Hoyt, *Town Hall Tonight* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall: 1955) 42.

¹⁰³ Hoyt 43.

major vaudeville houses in New York City, he nonetheless maintained it in as well appointed a fashion as the larger “palaces” of Proctor and Albee¹⁰⁴. Zellers, his biographer, reports that the fastidious lessee performed a complete facelift within the house each summer.¹⁰⁵ One newspaper took pains to relate that the annual opening in 1885, during which Pastor celebrated four years residence at what would be his final home, displayed a “proscenium newly painted, and neat velvet and lace decorations placed in front of the boxes.”¹⁰⁶ When a fire ravaged his theatre in 1888, Pastor took the opportunity of the restoration to further evoke an allegiance with the upper class.

A new proscenium arch spanned the stage, supported on each end by two large columns and decorated in bas-relief with a center panel of Terpsichore flanked by medallions of Satire and Comedy. Patrons entered the lobby through a new portico with Corinthian columns, bevel-plate glass doors, and a colored glass transom. The walls of the lobby itself were now freshly plastered and the floor tiled with white marble.¹⁰⁷

The mania to exteriorize this higher class affiliation soon became epidemic. By 1919, six years after the opening of the Palace Theatre in New York City, this expectation for elegance had grown so commonplace that Edward Renton, in his manual on running a vaudeville theatre, cautioned prospective managers that silk and

¹⁰⁴ Tellingly, Pastor appears not to have considered his new décor an evolutionary advancement over the rougher hewn theatres in which he had spent his youth as a performer or his first years as a manager. Instead, Pastor believed a vaudeville theatre’s decoration, like the fare of the theatre itself, simply reflected the neighborhoods in which it was situated and therefore the economic class of those who attended. Naturally, he felt, his early houses had displayed fewer tokens of upper class respectability, fewer devices of high culture. A lower economic class of patrons, he noted, had patronized them. It was therefore only natural that structures welcoming the middle and upper classes reflect a different aesthetic. Pastor failed to continue the politically charged environment of his earlier houses now that he shared clientele with Tiffany’s, neither does he seem eager to follow Keith’s lead in condemning vaudeville’s forbearer. He had, after all, devoted a fair part of his life to its growth. Tony Pastor, *New York Sun* 27 Jan. 1907.

¹⁰⁵ Zellers 70.

¹⁰⁶ “At the Theatres,” *New York Mirror*, XIV (24 Oct. 1885) 2.

¹⁰⁷ Zellers 70.

damask should cover the walls. When providing the “Oriental effect,” he instructs, the ceilings should be gilded if at all possible, avoiding bronze at all cost. Such insistence on evoking high class, Renton assures his readers, is not only in “good taste” but is “effective.”¹⁰⁸ Keith’s Bijou proclaimed itself the first theatre in America equipped with electrical light, displaying a massive chandelier, “made for the Khendive of Egypt,” in a Moorish dome.¹⁰⁹

As David Nasaw has argued, this inclination to feature the theatre building itself reflected a thoroughly “reconfigured moral taxonomy of public amusements” during the Progressive era. Theatre owners of just a few years before, “as if ashamed of their products,” had often hidden the theatres and their marquees from the public eye, choosing out-of-the-way locations for second-floor halls.¹¹⁰ Now, the theatre proper would be featured as an attraction in its own right. The former theatres, which one English visitor found “‘prisonlike’ in [their] austerity,” became a paratextual palimpsest upon which ever-shifting notations of higher taste cultures might be floridly written.¹¹¹ Inappropriate language might evade the censorship systems, slippage in audience decorum might burst into a performance, but such challenges to the principles justifying polite vaudeville became less threatening when seated within houses of gilded friezes, filtered water, and velvet-covered chairs. This move was particularly important when the content of the acts and the behavior of the audience provided no buttress against continued criticism of popular theatre by clergy and civic organizations. Moreover, the theatre itself now became one of the chief expressions of managerial intent, his signature upon the deed of trust with the public. This canny move colluded with increased turnover of acts to inure the producing organization

¹⁰⁸ Edward Renton, *The Vaudeville Theatre: Building, Operation, Management.*, (New York: Gotham, 1918) 66, 67.

¹⁰⁹ McLean 20.

¹¹⁰ Nasaw 34.

¹¹¹ Frank Brooks qtd. in Nasaw 36.

against uproar caused by any “indecent” turns that crossed its stage. Formerly, the performers were often members of a resident variety stock company or entertainers of long standing in the community. Now, a rebellious or vulgar act was no more than a transient disruption within the gracefully decorated environs that both preceded and survived such uncouthness. The richly wrought pediments on the theatre-front signaled protection against a baseness that might momentarily overcome, but never outlast. Such paeans to the onwardness of middle class refinement must have sung forth in a somewhat funereal tenor to remaining working class patrons in the opulent big time houses.

Awash in the final years of a Gilded Age whose greatest treasures were sequestered along the Newport coastline, many in the audience applauded the vaudeville magnates as curators placing the upper class equivalent of the Elgin Marbles within their scopic and tactile control. “It is almost incredible,” one columnist enthused, “that all this elegance should be placed at the disposal of the public, the poor as well as the rich.”¹¹² In this plaudit we witness not only an acknowledgement of the vaudeville audience as a group drawn from across various economic strata, but one whose corporate overlords actively encouraged an idolatry of those few who now engorged themselves on the nation’s resources. Even the managers of small time vaudeville did their best to reflect the display of decorative and architectural refinement that increasingly characterized the big time houses. Managers in the smaller, rougher hewn houses worried over the purity of water in the lavatories, the thinness of carpeting in the lobby, and the school of reproduced art they chose throughout the house.

Joe Weber, reputed to be the first low comedian to master the finger-in-the-eye poke, later recalled that the early polite vaudeville theatre “was a high class place.

¹¹² Ella Butler Evans qtd. in McLean 193-194.

Why, the men brought their wives in their jewelry and fur and things.”¹¹³ Weber was not alone in envisioning the audience as the final element in vaudeville décor. Indeed, one might argue that one handsomely outfitted the Broadway Music Hall chairs, which would, after all, be out of view during the performance, so as to encourage the audience to respond in kind, to dress in a manner befitting the theatre they patronized. Certainly, one overwrought Memphian reviewer conceptualized the process in such a manner. In an undated column lamenting season’s end at Martin Beck’s Memphis Orpheum house, one Bernard Cohn affirms

Manager Max Fabish has made the house worthy of the patronage it receives. He is a master of detail who believes that little things well done go to make a complete whole. His theatre is distinctive, yet restful, artistic yet comfortable. The Orpheum has made vaudeville respected by the best class of theatre-goers.

In turn, this “best class” stages itself for the edification of Memphis.

A Memphian can take the stranger, and especially of [sic] a Monday evening, he can point with pride at the audience which graces that playhouse. It is a gathering of beauty and fashions that can be compared with any. Silks and laces vie with nature in producing a scene of beauty that is satisfying to the eyes.

At no time does Cohn’s heated eulogy for the past season address the content-aspect of a single turn. Rather, it revolves around a theatrical environment whose *mise en scene* includes the proscenium arch, aisles, chairs, boxes, murals and finally, well dressed audience members. All that is missing in his analysis is a stage and performers, though we miss it less because Cohn unwittingly identifies precisely those performers who had been staged by Fabish throughout the year (and paying for the privilege): the people of Memphis. When the reviewer laments that such “a farewell

¹¹³ Joe Weber qtd. in "There's Only One Paris -- And That's New York." UI 05 Sep. 1936, p. 3

always summons up a feeling of regret,” he does not mourn the summer absence of beloved comedians or treasured songbird. Instead, he eulogizes Memphis’ temporary inability to stage its own particular articulation of class migration on Beck’s inverted stage. If, as Cohn offers, the Orpheum “has found a nook in our lives,” it was that corner in which the language of class might have been spoken plainly as public, communal display.¹¹⁴ Indeed, lacking a stage for such articulation and display during the sweltering Tennessee summer, Memphis might be fairly said to have not had this class at all.

Of course, the physical attributes of the theatre and its spectators, now both on display, were not alone in occasioning a vigorous reexamination of the play of culture in the vaudeville house. They also placed spectator decorum under their lens. Managers understood that the polite culture born in and displayed by their new audience members—a polite culture they sought to reflect in the more elegant surrounding of the physical environment—could be destroyed by audience behavior more appropriate to the variety in the Bowery than vaudeville in midtown. Managers and audience members alike now turned their attention upon those seated in the least expensive seats in the house: members of the gallery. Gallery patrons were necessarily flies in the ointment that was polite vaudeville. The expense of the shows and profit possibilities within the hugely popular developing form encouraged the construction of ever larger theatres so as to contain the greatest number of seats. The inclusion of lower priced seats, albeit at a far remove from the stage, helped cover the high costs of winning the bidding war for talent that various chains and local managers waged against one another in their efforts to secure renowned acts and non-performing celebrities (e.g., Helen Keller) for their bills. Moreover, the rapid increase in the

¹¹⁴ Bernard Cohn, "Amusements. Orpheum." Pat Rooney II Collection, Harry Ransom Center for the Humanities, University of Texas, Austin.

number of vaudeville houses meant that patronage from the upper- and middle-classes, already far lower in gross percentage of the urban population than their working class counterparts, had been splintered betwixt a number of theatres. The vaudeville house, that home to polite culture, therefore could not afford to support its efforts with the capital of non-working class patrons alone. Working class audiences, heirs to various variety entertainments that had always prized their presence as an integral producer of theatrical culture throughout a more interactive performance, were therefore required by a new genre of entertainment that defined itself, in part, by the absence of the decorum and contributions long associated with spectators from the working class. In effect, polite vaudeville depended upon this group to subsidize the ritualistic performance of its own erasure.

The radical shift in behavior sought by vaudeville managers occurred as part of a long period of transition in consumer decorum in United States' culture. As Lawrence Levine has argued in *Highbrow/Lowbrow* and elsewhere, the nineteenth-century witnessed radical alteration in American audience behavior in venues as varied as the variety theatre, concert hall, and opera house. Though the specifics and degree of change varied from genre to genre, American audiences generally accepted a less reciprocal performer-audience dynamic by the end of the century. In vaudeville, the shift to the polite form of variety presentation had simply accelerated and foregrounded the process. The more strenuously interactive efforts of the "gallery gods" represented the worst displays of lower class behavior for the new overlords of corporate vaudeville. Seated facing the exposed backs of spectators in the more expensive seats, gallery patrons, like wayward children in the back of a schoolroom, had made great use of their remove from view. They were notorious in their collective guying of performers, and more than a few variety performers learned that, when displeased, the "gods" could bring thunder from on high. Pat Rooney II, both progeny

and sire in one of variety entertainment's royal families, recalled a childhood spent with his father, Pat Rooney I in the mid- to late- nineteenth-century variety theatres. The younger Rooney, in the preparatory notes for a never-completed memoir, remembered that "getting over" at Pastor's later 14th St. assured himself a flattering ovation; getting over at Pastor's Bowery theatre in the 1860s, however, served chiefly to save his father from one of the frequent bombardments of green apples from the gallery. Clearly, such behavior had played a great role in the variety house's reputation for aggression and, at times, something close to mob rule. Having gifted those above them in economic station with a vibrant means of interrogating and enjoying performance, audience members in the lowest economic class would now be asked to adjust their behavior to the standard of the Arrow Collar Man.

Those attempting to affect the shift to polite vaudeville thus focused much of their attention on creating order within the gallery. Keith, in particular, gave frequent and self-congratulatory accounts to the press regarding what he framed as the tiring but necessary disciplining of the gallery. His most famous story concerns an incident in a New England house that had long been graced (or cursed) with an interactive gallery.

During the first performance in this new large house, the gallery commenced its usual demonstrations, mostly complimentary, but in a very noisy way, so I stepped out onto the stage and explained to this portion of the audience that it would not be able to continue these demonstrations any longer. I said, "You can't do that here. You know you did not do it in my other house, and while I know that you mean no harm by it, and only do it really from the goodness of your hearts, but others in the audience do not like it, and it does not tend to improve the character of the entertainment, and I know that you will agree with me that it is better to omit it hereafter." As I walked off, I received a round of

applause from the whole house, including the gallery. And that was the last of the noise from the gallery gods.¹¹⁵

Robert Snyder correctly finds this tale, frequently repeated by others with little interrogation, “too pat and smug to be fully credible,” but credits it with showing Keith’s “seriousness.”¹¹⁶ Alison Kibler, in her study of the nexus of gender, culture and vaudeville, troubles Keith’s account a bit more but agrees that it provides “one version of vaudeville’s history.”¹¹⁷ More than anything, however, the story confirms Robert Allen’s observation that Pastor and Keith joined the same struggle but fought on different fronts. Pastor, after all, began with an all-male audience at a variety theatre and spent the better part of two decades attempting to attract a mixed gender audience. Keith, whose move into vaudeville originated in the dime-museum, began with a mixed-gender audience, but one made up almost exclusively of working class families. While Pastor toiled to attract families to the 14th St. theatre, Keith worked to get a mixed class of families.¹¹⁸ The working class that had frequented his dime-museum had therefore proved a drag on his attempt to attract middle class audiences into the rapidly expanding chain of Keith-Albee theatres.

Keith probably had no great desire to expunge lower white collar and upper working class audiences from his houses, if only because his price structure depended on attracting a mass of mid-range customers, rather than the increasingly spare self-select who supported the legitimate theatre. Though costs were not always comparable between vaudeville and the legitimate, maintaining a ticket price at a fraction of its legitimate counterpart clearly demanded Keith prize bulk attendance

¹¹⁵ Albert F. McLean, Jr., ed., “Genesis of Vaudeville: Two Letters from B.F. Keith,” *Theatre Survey* I (1960) 93-94.

¹¹⁶ Snyder 31.

¹¹⁷ Kibler 24.

¹¹⁸ Robert C. Allen, “B.F. Keith and the Origins of American Vaudeville,” *Theatre Survey* Vol. 21, No. 2 (November 1980) 114.

over the gated community of probity and high culture of which he often spoke. Yet as with the smoke and bars in Pastor's first houses, the very presence of the lower economic strata marked the environment as unfit for their economic betters, placing Keith on the horns of a dilemma: he needed the audiences that had frequented his dime-museum to continue to patronize the vaudeville houses; he simply required that they achieve a social decorum consistent with those far above their economic station. If Keith could not materially improve the economic station of those in the gallery—indeed, one of his house managers fondly described audience members as those people whom Keith had separated from their pocket change—he could at least encourage (and later mandate) their behavior to align itself with that of their “betters,” in essence promising all of the social restrictions of capital with none of the actual economic benefits.¹¹⁹

Keith's emphasis on appearance and the play of class is not surprising. Unlike Pastor, the reformed circus clown, or Proctor, the former equilibrist, Keith's background lay entirely in sales, with his only real managerial experience prior to the Bijou arriving through the dime-museum. It is only natural, then, that Keith busied himself with the façade presented by the audience itself, while Pastor devoted more time to ensuring that the content of his performances would command respect from the respectable. (One might also note that Pastor's rather late arrival to the play of class partly accounts for his fifteen years of frustrated attempts to convince the general population that his wares were safe for consumption.)

As we have seen, Keith took great pains to advertise the accoutrements of success through the well-publicized presence of chandeliers, marble foyers and the like. Construction and renovation of his growing chain of theatres provided the

¹¹⁹ Manager's Report (Detroit), Temple Theatre, 19 Jan. 1903, Keith-Albee Collection, University of Iowa, Iowa City.

opportunity for an even balder linking of capital to culture. Unlike Pastor, Keith and Albee trumpeted the amount they spent building and outfitting vaudeville's spaces. Their New Theatre (often miscalled The Colonial) rang the bell at almost \$700,000 in 1894. Even death could not end Keith's conjoining of class and capital. In 1922, eight years after Keith's passing, Albee, the man Joe Laurie famously termed his partner's "Richelieu," erected the \$5,000,000 Cleveland Palace in Keith's honor.¹²⁰ In publicizing such expenditure, the Keith-Albee chain welded capital so tightly to décor and architecture that the physical structure operated as the materialization of economic success. Attendance in the vaudeville hall, therefore, may rightly be viewed as so many pilgrimages to the flesh of capitalism made real, both in the structure itself and in the corporeal presence of those who came to ally themselves with its ethos of success.

For those resistant souls, such as the demonstrative gallery members confronted in Keith's tale, polite vaudeville reserved a special measure of discipline. The discourse of polite vaudeville, wending through these ornate friezes and glittering facades, placed the resisting reader against the more problematically confronted social institution, rather than social individual. The nationalized operation most likely to create profit also pitted local audiences—heirs of what had been the nation's preeminent neighborhood entertainment—against often competing values and beliefs from far-away cities for the ethos of the genre. Meeting the single performer with resistance meant less when the circuit's booking structure would whisk her from the neighborhood within days; pre-corporate variety performers knew they would have to return in front of the same group within a matter of days. Combating the manager of a theatre had less effectiveness when that manager found himself beholden to a circuit owner before the box office.

¹²⁰ Gilbert 206.

The nationalization enabled by the corporate structure also somewhat universalized what had once been particularized social mores and political questions. Albee overstates this phenomenon in ascribing vaudeville's "universal appeal" to the fact that "its standards are the same everywhere, its artists the same everywhere," but individual audiences did find the targets of their resistance more generalized than in the past.¹²¹ It was, after all, much more effective to create a row against a joke barbing a beloved local candidate than against a national party or political persuasion. This learned precision so unnerved managers that they frequently sought to censor performers who drew local subjects into the arena. One 1921 manager sternly forbade headlining comedian Fred Allen from lambasting local politicians, nearby hotels, and most importantly, the management of the theatre itself.¹²² Boston managers frequently cautioned visiting acts to excise lines such as "Erin Go Bragh" or "Freedom in Ireland," lest they stir up unruly responses from working-class and lace-curtain Irish Bostonians.¹²³

Most insidiously, the rules of middle class respectability framed the real-time confrontation that had created the productive audience agency as *déclassé*; the former hallmark of the audience now found itself squarely in Keith's crosshairs. Mostly, Keith's tale seems doubtful because vaudeville's most effective means of taming the more combative lower class audiences occurred apart from any corporeal embodiment of disciplinary agency; as with any economic exercise of power, the system is best served when those it attempts to discipline learn to self-modify. Keith's past triumph

¹²¹ Edward F. Albee, "Twenty Years of Vaudeville," *American Vaudeville as Seen by its Contemporaries*, ed. Charles W. Stein (New York: Knopf, 1984) 215.

¹²² Manager's Report, Boston, 11 Jul. 1921, Keith-Albee Collection, University of Iowa, Iowa City.

¹²³ The managers, however, had played their part in creating such danger through their dependence on variegated massification for a national audience. If the working class now sat in the plush chairs of the Tiffany's shoppers, the latter group now gained license to resist from their ritualistic commingling with the quickly unionizing day laborers.

as nomenclator probably set the stage for the most reliably documented attempt to nullify the power of the “gallery:” he renamed it the “second balcony.”

Keith’s tale, at least in its conclusion (“And that was the last of the noise from the gallery gods”) remains demonstrably false. Though reforming managers had targeted the denizens of the gallery since the earliest days of variety, even the collapse of vaudeville in the early 1930s did not present the docile crowd proposed as the denouement to Keith’s story. This is not to say that the gallery held a place outside time and culture as the genre matured around them. Without question, the gallery that loomed over Woodrow Wilson, a great fan of vaudeville, during his presidency held itself in equipoise more frequently and with greater success than that which had greeted the initiation of the genre in the early to mid-1880s. I have discovered no instances of twentieth-century audience members pelting performers, signaling the abandonment of a long-treasured means of communicating displeasure. Additionally, the Rabelaisian interactivity that allowed an audience to call for “The Opossum Up the Old Gum Tree” in the midst of Hamlet’s soliloquy clearly dissolved by vaudeville’s peak in the first two decades of the twentieth-century.

However, Keith by no means vanquished his foe. In 1909, several years after he would have had to confront his gallery, the “second balcony” once again inserted itself as player within the vaudeville matrix. Keith-Albee had imported French singer Madame Yvette Guilbert as a representative of the elevated culture it hoped would be adopted by members of every class within its houses. Renowned for her demureness and delicacy of physical expression, Guilbert, the headliner, met with a most unwelcome reception. Decrying “the boorish outbursts” that originated in the gallery, a reviewer concluded that he had been present at “one of the most unmannerly

manifestations of rowdiness ever witnessed in a New York playhouse”¹²⁴ As late as 1928, well into vaudeville’s death throes, one singer was still performing routines in which he called for members of the gallery—those “folks in the bleachers”—to drop peanuts and candy on those sitting in the more expensive seats below.

Managers therefore publicized and dutifully reported on this equivalency they hoped would finally still the nettlesome foes to middle class docility: those who earned and understood less were more demonstrative than those who exceed them in salary and cultural acuity. This relation is unsurprising. The interests of consolidated capital, after all, demanded the purgation of disruptive cultural displays, many of which were redolent of the labor unrest and anti-corporate muckraking journalism that bedeviled the era’s magnates. Convincing those patrons in lower economic strata opposing the intentions of corporate culture marked one as less worthy of socio-economic ascent, it was hoped, would cause those so inclined to quiet themselves. So strong was this worldview of audience behavior that managers, usually objective in their gauging of how well an act went over with the audience, often made excuses for high class acts that had been tepidly received. The fact that an act had high class “merit” yet elicited no great applause, went the reasoning of one Boston manager in 1903, established definitively that it “must appeal to the nicer class of people.”¹²⁵ Richard Nixon was not the first, it would seem, to imagine the approbation of a silent majority.

The chains were well aware that many in the audience found high-class presentations dull and indigestible within the rapid-fire structure of vaudeville. Most important, though in many other regards the management bowed to the audience’s

¹²⁴ Fred Schrader “Yvette Guilbert Insulted,” *Washington Post* 17 Oct. 1909, Harvard Theatre Collection, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.

¹²⁵ M. J. Keating, Manager’s Report Boston, Temple Theatre, 12 Jan. 1903, Keith-Albee Collection, University of Iowa, Iowa City.

demands, it continued booking high class acts partly out of the expectation that the inapproachability of the content (for the working class) and the mode of comportment suggested by various high class genres would help tame resistant audience members, even as it educated them. To an extent, arguments like Levine's raise an important point. Though the salability of merry chaos and audience control was an obvious factor behind such historically distinct American entertainments as the concert saloon and modern professional wrestling, vaudeville managers understandably wish to allow events outside their control only up to the point where audience power interrupts the profitable consumption of their wares. The managers were renting seats, not fomenting rebellion. Any Rabelaisian fantasies about a joyously unfettered working class must acknowledge that these moments existed against, not within, the corporate mission of polite vaudeville.

In this regard, the booking of acts such as Guilbert represented a managerial acknowledgement that *décor* and decorum alone had not been able to impress vaudeville's audience with the understanding that the playing of class required an unerring performance of disciplined and outwardly passive absorption. Slippage in modalities of behavior and interaction continued to appear throughout the house. Managers therefore turned to high-class European performers as exemplars, not simply of culture but of behavior.¹²⁶ Historian James Johnson, for example, has joined others in arguing that European opera spectatorship underwent a monumental alteration in audience comportment in the period leading up to the mid-nineteenth

¹²⁶ Almost without fail, the only foreign performers to be secured and promoted as "class acts" came from (or were sold as having come from) Europe. Certainly, vaudeville employed acts at least purporting to represent almost every nationality; Burmese foot jugglers, Australian lariatist, and Japanese kimono models all had their time upon its stages. Yet most of these acts were either displayed as curiosities or performed as variations upon a low American specialty (e.g., the Australian trick ropist as a foreign type of the early Will Rogers lariat act). Many of these acts—particularly those relating to various Asian traditions—were accorded status as "very pretty" or "exquisite," but it appears not to have occurred to either managers or audience that there might be such a thing as Japanese classical music, not could they imagine American souls benefiting in the same fashion as they might during an encounter with Wagner.

century. As with the “gall’ry” peopled by the noisiest members of the vaudeville audience, prior to the sacralization of European opera Parisian lovers—more of one another than of Jean-Philippe Rameau’s florid orchestrations--bent on assignations sought the upper reaches of the opera house to escape the disciplining gaze of “the probing lorgnettes.”¹²⁷ By the mid-nineteenth century, the late arrivals, gossip conversation, and loud rejoinders that had once defined the audiences at even the “finest” operas gave away to “appreciative silence” in the auditorium.¹²⁸ Similarly, stand-alone performances of classical instrumental music had hammered its audiences into a new position of reflective (if emotionally charged) repose. Where Franz Liszt had once improvised melodies based on themes suggested from the audience in the 1840s, correctly trained auditors in the late nineteenth century sat until cued to applaud at the “correct” places in the performance.¹²⁹

As Levine has convincingly demonstrated, these newly passive modes of spectatorship, largely European in provenance, had infiltrated their American stand-alone counterparts (i.e., the symphony, opera, art museums) by the time of polite vaudeville’s rise in the 1880s. Although vaudeville and its variety forbearers had long maintained various modes of audience comportment that would have felt at least somewhat familiar to the decidedly interactive modes of theatre spectatorship in centuries past, vaudeville now found that its acceptance of a wide array of sacred forms also invited their correlating spectatorship modes. In short, because one began

¹²⁷ Johnson is speaking here of the period from 1750 to the mid-nineteenth century. As Levine makes clear, it took until the end of Johnson’s era of concern for these same modes of comportment to rule the American opera. James H. Johnson, *Listening in Paris: A Cultural History* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995) 9.

¹²⁸ Johnson 53.

¹²⁹ Moriz Rosenthal, student of Liszt, later sighed that the sacralization of the form and quieting of the audience ultimately deadened the performer. Contrasting early twentieth century performers with his teacher, Rosenthal said, “The more typical representatives of this modern-day seem less concerned with a free out-pouring of generous enthusiasms.... It is not considered ‘smart’ to give unfettered expression to one’s deepest emotions.” Moriz Rosenthal qtd. in Kenneth Hamilton, *After the Golden Age: Romantic Pianism and Modern Performance* (New York: Oxford UP, 2008) 5.

to behave differently in European opera houses in the late eighteenth century and European piano recitals in the mid-nineteenth century, one now behaved differently in the late-nineteenth century opera house. In part, these new modes of spectator behavior made their way into America because they transformed audience behavior models in individual genres prior to their introduction into vaudeville. By the 1870s, American stand-alone performance genres (e.g., opera as an entire evening of performance) began to be “performed in isolation from other forms of entertainment to an audience that was far more homogenous than those which had gathered earlier.”¹³⁰ Managers like Albee hoped that in re-integrating sacred forms of European culture back into a variety format, the more docile manner of conducting oneself would bleed across the entire performance. Rather than observe and interact with an opera as one might with a political monologist, for example, managers hope that vaudeville spectators would greet the monologist with the “after-the-fact” response now seen as appropriate to the opera. In so doing, the managers could more completely control the audience, using the pretension of Europhilia to discipline audiences into more obedient consumption. High-class European performance was therefore idealized by the managers as a damping device, not simply an avenue for edification.

While polite vaudeville professed little hope of sweeping Americans of color up in its general embrace of self-betterment (when it spoke of them at all), it affirmed the stereotype of European fare and performers as an analogue for high culture. Foreign performers had long graced American variety theatres, though as 1849’s Astor Place Riot demonstrates, not all European performers were met with fawning embrace by their American audiences. The lengthy and profitable tours of such European stars as George Fredrick Cooke early in the nineteenth-century had, in fact, crafted a rather persistent cultural memory of the European performer as both cultural carpetbagger

¹³⁰ Levine 101.

and money-grubbing fraud. Indeed, mid-nineteenth century variety took great delight in exposing what it saw as the undeserved correlation between foreign exoticism and high class.¹³¹ Yet corporate vaudeville, desirous of what it saw as the inarguable association of high class with European performers of sacred culture (and eager to repeat Barnum's mid-century success with the famed Jenny Lind tour), nearly every vaudeville chain of any size or importance sought to engage European performers. The perceived links between such acts and classical performance traditions, it was hoped, would not only further inure vaudeville against lingering suspicions of variety-era lewdness but grace the rich décor and proper patrons with a final patina of respectability.¹³²

Managers often pre-sold European class acts with extensive marketing campaigns. While this was partly out of a legitimate desire to increase box office, the marketing strategy also functioned in two different fashions in the furtherance of

¹³¹ In Pastor's earlier "Mechanics' Strike, or the Eight Hour System" Tom Spring, a young American laborer, and Augustus, a freeman, encounter two representatives of the European arts: Gustavis Garrick Gripsack, an actor from the Theatre Royal Swillside, and Mademoiselle Gilesini, prima donna of the British Opera House. Awash in embarrassing and nonsensical pretension, the Europeans are finally convinced by Tom—mocking them in iambic pentameter—to join him in seeking "gin and brandy, lager bier and ale" at the local saloon. Tony Pastor, "Mechanic's Strike, or The Eight Hour System," Tony Pastor Collection, Harry Ransom Humanities Center, University of Texas at Austin, Austin, Texas.

¹³² The scarcity of marketable class performers also played into the heavy pursuit of European class acts. As well, institutional efforts to challenge Keith's hegemony forced other vaudeville chains to reach beyond the American "class" performers, heavily conscripted by the Keith-Albee United Booking Office (UBO), and toward Europe. Rising with the Marc Klaw and Abraham Erlanger-backed United States Amusement Company (USAC, 1907) and its "Advanced Vaudeville," vaudeville began to place a greater premium on obtaining the imprimatur of higher culture through a simple association with European culture, a culture viewed as marvelously strange and exotic while still unimpeachably white. When members of the recent immigrant wave from Southern and Eastern Europe appeared too ethnic to be fit comfortably within Anglo-American ideations of high class, their acts often shifted toward the popular. Light-skinned Italian beauties, for example, could still appear as opera vocalists; "copper hued sons of toil," to use one critic's piquant phrase, invariably took the stage as acrobats. Interestingly, European performances of sacred culture were not necessarily bound by stereotypes of national excellence within certain performance forms. Though Shakespearean monologists were frequently English and opera soloists quite often Italian, members of the various European ethnic groups with a place in American popular consciousness—German, English, Italian, Russian, and French, primarily—could play across a wide range of sacred cultural performance genres. Irish performers, still suffering from decades of low comedy stereotyping in America, appear to have been the exception. Few native Irish performers took the vaudeville stage as consciously ethnic class acts.

corporate motives. First, the advertising and whisper campaigns promoted not only the worth of the individual acts but vaudeville itself as an institution of high class, fashion, and refinement. Even those not attending the shows found themselves deluged by advertisements and “interviews” (the journalist was often on the theatre’s payroll) in up to five daily editions of the city’s papers. In a sense, this indirect campaign—reaching those who still refused to visit the theatre—was a marvelously effective tool in reshaping public perception of the growing genre. Second, though vaudeville’s appetite for novelty created a managerial interest in “discovering” acts and finding “new sensations,” European class acts were almost always sold to the public as being long-standing successes on foreign shores. One “national treasure” or another seemed to be making his or her way across vaudeville’s boards each week. The selling tactic became such an industry staple that soon-to-be theatre critic George Jean Nathan, future confidant of Eugene O’Neill and only a year out of Cornell, was led to address it as the last of his “Ten Commandments of Vaudeville:” “Thou shalt bear false witness on the billboards as to the large number of the performers thou wouldst have us believe have appeared before the crowned cocos of Europe.”¹³³

Managers hoped such strategies would operate in two fashions. First, a weaker act or more obscure piece of sacred culture would enter the stage to a more receptive audience. Spectators had already pre-digested part of the act—its reputation—prior to its commencement. Next, having been told that their cultural betters in high European society had already approved of the import, those disinclined to bestow favor, for reasons ranging from personal preference to a poor performance, would be less likely to express evident dissatisfaction; the Emperor was, after all, modeling exquisite finery. Both conceits attempted to eliminate from consideration or actuality the vaudeville audience’s ability to properly adjudicate an act.

¹³³ George Jean Nathan, “Ten Commandments of Vaudeville,” *Bohemian Magazine*, July 1904: 66.

Indeed, where mid nineteenth-century high culture presentations had made such nods to populism as translating lyrics into English, vaudeville, in its pursuit of culture by proxy, sometimes appeared profoundly disinterested in whether or not its patrons could make out the most basic elements of the presentations. Often, the managers expected their regulars to let the higher culture wash over them, a tonic to their baser selves. Certain acts and performance traditions proved better at this than most. Managers and audiences assumed Italian and German high class singers issued forth with a high degree of legitimacy as culture bearers. Quite often, of course, few in the house could understand the lyrics or libretti, though the middle class ideation of highbrow European material conceptualized the performances as something close to classical emanations that might be appreciated by the more culturally sensitive members of the audience. Ludwig Wullner, a German lieder singer, appeared in Oakland during the 1911-1912 season, with a brief program of Schubert, Schumann, and Strauss, all sung in German. "Hearing him, one unacquainted with the language of the Fatherland regrets the fact, sincerely, since a part of the charm is undeniably lost," lamented one reviewer. "Yet, such is the power of Wullner's personality, penetrating the barrier on an alien tongue, one feels instinctively the meaning that lies behind the words." The tremendous reception the music received from a crowd largely ignorant of the meaning of the various libretti, the pleased reviewer opined, stood as "a tribute to the artistic discernment of the Oakland public."¹³⁴ This appraisal appeared contemporaneously with countless Progressive efforts to create an America that spoke only English. Those who understood the songs because they remained conversant in an inherited tongue, in other words, failed the litmus test of vaudeville's uneasy truce with foreign highbrow culture. Only those with the extensive schooling that might

¹³⁴ Newspaper Review, "The Orpheum." *Oakland Enquirer*, Nov. 1911, Harvard Theatre Collection, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

grant them facility in a decidedly non-American language were permitted to fully appreciate Wullner's offerings. In any case, the middle class and lower classes, girded with aspiration and limited by opportunity, were better off simply letting the music cascade over them as they feigned competency in a taste culture other than their own.

Some European class artists had a difficult time adjusting to the vagaries of vaudeville performance. Madame Eugenia Mantelli, an Italian opera vocalist, met with wildly mixed reactions during her 1902-1903 tour across the Keith-Albee chain. One house found her "an emphatic hit;" another theatre's manager moved her earlier in the bill after she failed to carry the audience and then forced her to play her entire repertoire of songs in front of a dropped curtain. (He did so to allow an act of trained spaniels to set up its turn upstage.) Acknowledging that artists such as Mantelli were often employed for the respectability and cultural edification they brought to a comparative few, one manager marveled that she had been "the hit of the show." "This is unusual," he wrote corporate headquarters, "inasmuch as an artiste of her caliber is usually above the audience."¹³⁵ That such managers were often surprised when the heterogeneous audience fully appreciated European class acts clearly outlines the true intention behind their having been booked in the first place. They were, in short, tokens of culture whose primary job was to sanctify the vaudeville house for the purpose of ritualizing consumption by the upper- and middle-classes. American acts that excited the audiences as little as some European class acts would have found the circuit rough sledding.

Other managers, less willing to subsidize non-drawing class acts now that vaudeville was firmly entrenched in the national consciousness, attempted to reason out her worth as a high class performer within their calculations of revenue versus

¹³⁵ H.A. Daniels, Manager's Report, Philadelphia, 23 Feb 1903, Keith-Albee Collection, University of Iowa, Iowa City.

cost. The Boston manager complained that he had spent more on advertising Mantelli's arrival than he would realize in any boost in ticket revenue.¹³⁶ Two weeks later, a New York manager placed her culture bearing properties firmly on the scales in the cold calculus of profit. Admitting that "she has a very good voice indeed and went very nicely," he nevertheless held that

there is no singer in the world that is worth the money that we pay her, to us, unless she can create sufficient interest to draw it in, and I don't think she's going to do it here. As a matter of fact, I think that's so far as the New York house is concerned, that a woman at 75 dollars or one hundred dollars per week would be just as valuable to us as she is.¹³⁷

Weeks later, a Philadelphia manager admitted that his own lack of expertise in the area rendered him unable (and it seems, more than a little disinterested) to sort through the deep matters of sacred culture when judging an act. Reporting on another singer who was now touring with many of the songs for which Mantelli had recently become noted, he sighed, "These soloists all look alike to me; and as I am not a musical critic, I am not in a position to say whether she is as good as [other vocalists in her line] or better." In the end, he decided, the faux Mantelli had been a good investment because "she seemed to please" the audience.¹³⁸

Managers thus served as the weak link in the progression from consolidated capital to corporate vaudeville to the massified audience. While it was his job to enforce and give local voice to the chain's ideology and polite vaudeville's ethos, his own success was judged most often along the simple metric of revenue. It was

¹³⁶ M. J. Keating, Manager's Report, Boston (Temple Theatre), 02 Mar. 1903, Keith-Albee Collection, University of Iowa, Iowa City.

¹³⁷ Henry LeClair, Manager's Report, New York, 16 Mar. 1903, Keith-Albee Collection, University of Iowa, Iowa City.

¹³⁸ H.A. Daniels, Manager's Report, Philadelphia, 23. Mar. 1903, Keith-Albee Collection, University of Iowa, Iowa City.

therefore not in his best interests to support and form a bill around a high class European performer unless she consistently proved attractive to an audience that was not always inclined to rein in its dissatisfaction or to sit placidly through its boredom. The manager thus served masters on both sides, audience and corporate masters, each of which demanded tasks incommensurate with one another and the institution itself. Perhaps most importantly, managers themselves almost never had the background to judge aptly a well performed selection from *Tannhäuser* from its ineptly sung cousin. That these local businessmen served as the adjudicators for sacred culture within the walls of their individual theatres gives the lie to polite vaudeville's claims that class acts, howsoever they might have been veiled or advertised, were ever about much more than creating an image that quelled dissent while promoting a salable degree of respectability. Given the managers' ineptitude in distinguishing one act from the other, they certainly could not have been chiefly concerned with promoting the finest displays of high culture.

And yet, vaudeville did attract scores of truly excellent European class acts. Its success in this endeavor was greatly because the huge amounts of revenue the genre had begun to generate allowed it to sign fine performers to lengthy, large contracts. Additionally, corporate vaudeville's own self-publicizing efforts at ensuring refinement and "proper" decorum began to license performers from sacred cultural forms to appear in the gilded palaces. One 1913 critic allowed that "old-time patrons of the variety theatre" would be surprised at the performers now circulating on the vaudeville circuits. Even "opera singers with trained voices," he informs he readers, "now find it remunerative to accept vaudeville engagements without impairing their stature."¹³⁹

¹³⁹ "Edna Showalter at New Brighton," *Brooklyn Citizen*, 19 Aug. 1913.

Such performers, cognizant of the complex dynamic between culture and cash in the vaudeville enterprise, understood themselves to reside in a situation as rife with advantages denied to native born performers as it was fitted with difficulties caused by the nature of European acts. As I have previously discussed, such performers did benefit from a certain amount of public leeway when soliciting approval. Few audience members wished to be one of the only voices ringing out against an act pre-sold as and communally expected to be edifying to the “right sort” of person. The marketing also helped insulate such foreign high class acts from the quick hook or rapid plummeting down the bill that met many native-born acts: advertisements had already created a sizeable pool expecting to see the act in a featured spot. Similarly, the class presumed of many European types was often enough in the public’s eyes to transform a fair act into a well received one. This was, for example, true of a pair of 1903 French performers, whose presence, one manager allowed, had turned what would have been only “passable” in an American team into something bearing the “grace and magnetism that is the all-pervading feature of the French performers....”¹⁴⁰ American acts, conversely suffered from this lack of mystique and presumed class. Fulgora, a large and successful scenic novelty act, made a tremendous impression on a 1903 manager. More than anything, he delighted that their native born status made them less desirable for his competitors and thus cheaper for him to contract. “If this act came from Europe,” he reported with evident relish, “everybody would be after it.”¹⁴¹ Because corporate vaudeville considered European acts more capable of disciplining the audience into a dutifully absorptive repose and more laden with innate high class, Fulgora soldiered on for less money.

¹⁴⁰ Manager’s Report, New York, 31 Aug. 1903, Keith-Albee Collection, University of Iowa, Iowa City.

¹⁴¹ Percy G. Williams, Manager’s Report, (Orpheum Theatre), 02 Feb. 1903, Keith-Albee Collection, University of Iowa, Iowa City.

These European performers, often quite skilled in their respective lines and partially protected by corporate vaudeville's need to appear respectable, nonetheless understood they faced several very real obstacles. They now performed before audiences unfamiliar with the larger context (e.g., *Hamlet*) surrounding their act (e.g., a collection of soliloquies). The forms they were called upon to represent (e.g., opera) rarely fit effortlessly into the tight time constraints of vaudeville's multi-act bill. Full ballets had to be trimmed down to single dances while lengthy opera appeared only in their briefest, most easily extractable, and often, fieriest pieces. Such acts thus lacked the surrounding context that would have helped an audience unfamiliar with the work to more fully appreciate the offering. As well, language barriers continued to plague the many audience members who demanded that the performance meet them on their own cultural terms and in their own language. The Amoros Sisters, a 1910s vocal act, completely lost the interest of their audience by presenting an unbroken series of songs with non-English lyrics. Disgruntled reviews swiftly ran in the local paper. "They sang," the critic admitted, "but no one knew what. ... Well, they could probably make a bigger hit [in France] than here."¹⁴² Such performers understandably suffered when placed in an arena that so valued topicality and local flavor. Their acts, after all, had been contracted for the express purpose of avoiding these content aspects that so frequently called back into being interaction reminiscent of the demonized variety. It is less surprising that acts consisting entirely of foreign, high class performance sometimes foundered than that this often frustrated the very managers who had booked them for a tour destined for difficulty.

The shrewder European high class performers, however, found ways of playing at class while gaining the audience favor that would preserve bargaining rights

¹⁴² "Lillian Herlein Poli's Feature," newspaper review, Pat Rooney II Collection, Harry Ransom Humanities Center, University of Texas at Austin, Austin, Texas.

with managers and the chain. Mantelli's greatest successes, for example, apparently resulted from her acknowledging the new context for her performances. Frequently sandwiched between acts as varied and entrenched in popular culture as trick ponies and ventriloquists, she began her way across the coast mixing in selections from popular music and musical comedies. When her act went over big, these lowbrow selections were among the first ones mentioned by her local employers. One manager, having welcomed Mantelli as the high class "good music" act demanded of the fifth slot in a seven-act bill, nevertheless found it was her acquiescence to popular tastes that marked her as a valuable addition. "She is clever," he related admiringly, "inasmuch as she comes down to the audience's understanding of music rather than try to raise them to her understanding. Her selections were the secret of her success."¹⁴³ Though beckoned as vessels of sacred culture, the most successful class acts understood that a failure to hold the fickle audience with out-of-context, non-English language material might lead to being replaced or bumped to an undesirable spot on the bill. One turn-of-the-century trio of Italian classical musicians, for instance, traveled the circuit with Mascagni's *Intermezzo Sinfonico* as "the only feature of the act;" they were dismissed as "too operatic for vaudeville."¹⁴⁴

The admixture of sacred and popular culture embraced by Mantelli became a defining element of many of the European class acts. Performing whilst in the grip of the prodding, restless, and heterogeneous audience, such performers responded by adopting American performance forms and idioms. Manager Percy Williams, who

¹⁴³ H.A. Daniels, Manager's Report, Philadelphia, 23 Feb 1903, Keith-Albee Collection, University of Iowa, Iowa City.

¹⁴⁴ Mantelli later learned the peril of being "too operatic" when she insisted to the Boston manager that grand opera could not be performed in one (i.e., in front of the dropped curtain); the manager calmly informed her that the show—blessed with a blackface comedian, motion pictures, a "Hebrew mimic," and, of course, her nemeses, the spaniels—would find her absence "no loss to the bill whatever." M. J. Keating, Manager's Report Boston (Temple Theatre), 02 Mar. 1903, Keith-Albee Collection, University of Iowa, Iowa City. Henry W. Behman, Manager's Report, Brooklyn (Hyde & Behman's), 10 Nov. 1902, Keith-Albee Collection, University of Iowa, Iowa City.

learned the nineteenth-century variety trade while selling electrified rheumatism cure belts in a traveling medicine show, felt that most American cities were not yet “cosmopolitan enough” to support a large number of strictly foreign sacred culture acts.¹⁴⁵ Most European class acts would have to vary their content by including native as well as foreign material. The variegated urban audiences of the vaudeville house, it seemed, were not ready to take the medicine fed them without having their say.

Most importantly, the vast majority of acts ostensibly booked for their worth as sacred culture performers—European and American performers alike—began to search for innovative, crowd pleasing ways of bending together the popular and the sacred within single acts. Vaudeville’s most socially efficacious inheritance from variety—rapt attention for those forms and manners of performance best suited to the wishes of the ticket buyer—would now reassert itself with a flourish that shattered genres and recombined taste cultures in magnificently inventive fashion. Pastor had invited the upper- and middle classes into the vaudeville house; Keith had attempted to train the remnants of Pastor’s audience. Working together, those two groups each now brought an important element into influencing vaudevilles taste cultures (and with them, vaudeville’s battle between combativeness and authority). The middle class’s interest in consumer oriented reform met the working class insistent prizing of interactivity and interrogation to force genres themselves into a subordinate position to audience pleasure and performer inventiveness. Both would mark the vaudeville playhouse as a unique environment for teasing apart received culture in Progressive America. Moreover, both, as we shall see, began to shift authority away from the managers and back to the collusive relationship between performer and spectator. Clearly, systemic critique of a “polite society” that benefited consolidated capital more than anything else was underway. The “omnipotent abstraction,” to use Wiebe’s

¹⁴⁵ “With the Men and Women of the Twice-a-Day,” *New York Times*, 06 May 1906: pg. 2

phrase, that had become capital's controlling desire would be teased apart in questions regarding the disciplining function of sacred culture.

Levine's attempt to locate a heterogeneous nineteenth-century American culture leads him to the Jacksonian theatre, an institution he initially discovers as bracingly pluralist. Yet for all the study's elegance and intelligence, Levine's own tendency towards rigid categorization reinstitutes a false hierarchy. In decrying the passing of "the theatre as a microcosm, [one that] housed both the entire spectrum of the population and the complete range of entertainment from tragedy to farce," Levine lapses into linear historicism.¹⁴⁶ That is, he imposes a false narrative upon the development of the legitimate theater, believing it possible (and oddly necessary) to connect the cultural exclusiveness of a modern Guthrie Theatre production of *Othello* with the cultural openness of its early nineteenth century counterpart through a strictly causal developmental line. In some sense, of course, this is possible and even attractive; the American legitimate stage's march from near-festival to near-funeral (in popular esteem) remains one of the most compelling narratives in the study of late 19th and early 20th-century Western theater. The limits of Levine's approach, however, become clear in his prologue. Startled at the profusion of early nineteenth-century African-American parodies of Shakespeare, Levine marvels at his late twentieth-century society, in which "Shakespeare is firmly entrenched in the pantheon of high culture. . . ."¹⁴⁷

There are two points to be made here. First, Levine's conception of canonical "Shakespeare" runs counter to American Shakespearean performance in the early nineteenth-century. Our modern preoccupation with the inviolable text—that altar upon which audiences for so many four hour productions of *Hamlet* have been

¹⁴⁶ Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow* 56.

¹⁴⁷ Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow* 8.

sacrificed—is a fairly recent phenomenon. The nineteenth-century audiences to which Levine refers were far more familiar with adaptations, truncations, and bastardizations than with the texts we imagine to have been delicately transcribed from the First Folio (a fourth-generation work in its own right). The parodies so admired by Levine thus signal a familiarity not necessarily with Shakespeare’s text, but with his central plot lines and well-known scenes and speeches, hardly the intimate and detailed knowledge Levine bemoans as lost. This more marginal familiarity remained throughout the period of vaudeville’s use of sacred culture, as is evidenced by the continual use of high-culture parody. Levine fails to recognize that late-nineteenth and early twentieth-century popular entertainments such as vaudeville continued fewer parodies of Shakespeare because the demographics of the country had so radically changed. The influx of third-wave immigrants from southern and eastern Europe, as well as the increasing presence of Jewish Americans in vaudeville’s offices and on her stages, meant that more ethnic and national traditions had to be compassed within the same bill. True, the *percentage* of overall vaudeville material concerning Shakespeare might have dropped somewhat by 1920, but the genre was now also including playlets on Jewish American identity crisis, various forms of Asian dance, and Russian tumbling. If the vaudeville stage became less focused on the classics that comprise Levine’s rather limited canon, it is partially because they recognized, incorporated, and finally parodied high-culture forms and pieces from a broader set of traditions. In this sense, Levine sounds remarkably like Harold Bloom, listing out a canon of books that excludes some of the more vibrant literature outside his own tradition.

Second, Levine allows the definitions of the cultural elite, who claim that only unadulterated Shakespeare may lay claim to cultural significance, to prevent the very aesthetic obtrusion he later eulogizes. Shakespeare’s influence remains throughout nearly every stratum of American class, through “legitimate” theatre, Tony award-

winning musical adaptations, or parodies on “Saturday Night Live.” High culture versions consume themselves either with a mortified presentation intended to ensure the audience of its authenticity or a “reimagining” of the text for a broader (i.e., less culturally elite) audience. Conversely, nods to the Bard in the popular sphere often signal an affectionate incorporation of his works into consumers’ everyday lives. When Levine contends that “cultural developments occurred [which] remove[d] Shakespeare from the American people,” he fails to account for the author’s perennial position atop the list of our most produced playwrights; one might instead ask who removed a heterogeneous class of American people from the theatre.¹⁴⁸ If Levine indeed searches for a ground of common cultural exchange, he need look no farther than the very popular forms he briefly celebrates and yet dismisses as parasitic.

Tellingly, Levine also credits the emergence of sacred culture with the expulsion of the lower classes from its audience. He fails to recognize that audience members more familiar and comfortable with variety performance and a highly reciprocal audience-performer performance might rather have conceptualized variety, burlesque, dime museums, and vaudeville as the true heirs to their own taste culture. For Levine, the enactment of Shakespeare’s text “was what most of [the audience] came to see,” providing the core of the early nineteenth-century evening at the theatre.¹⁴⁹ Romantic at best, Levine blithely ignores even so telling an artifact as the period’s playbills. Trumpeting not “Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*” but “Wm. Macready as Macbeth,” such bills delineate the varied attractions of the evening at length, placing the star turn far above authorship and taking great care to mention the many elements of the entertainment. Far from flocking to an event noted for its properties of edification, audience members seem to have attended an evening at the theatre, in

¹⁴⁸ Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow* 78.

¹⁴⁹ Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow* 23.

large part, in expectation of an aggregate of delights. More to my point, the bulk of the American audience continued to patronize such variety entertainment, like vaudeville, until the less expensive cinema crushed live performance under its sprocketed heel.

We must therefore ask why Levine's study of "the emergence of cultural hierarchy in America" concerns itself primarily with the proponents of hierarchies, rather than those who, seeking more direct and individualized control within the modalities of discipline and power that shape their lives, continually collapse such systems upon themselves. We must also note that popular entertainment seems to have abandoned Levine's concerns of contamination at the door of its new home. Though the nineteenth-century proponents of sacred culture demonstrated increasing disdain for the "diversions" that they had once embraced, vaudeville carried forward and developed its employment of pluralistic presentation. *Highbrow/Lowbrow* ultimately demonstrates that, though "19th century America swallowed Shakespeare", ¹⁵⁰ making him part of the cultural body, an oddly triumphant high culture attempt to reclaim him as its own. That is, when vaudeville's Shakespeare becomes but one more participant in a diffuse but vibrant popular culture, high culture sees him as no longer being Shakespeare, ceding the Bard to the upper regions of culture as spoils of internecine war. In truth, Shakespeare was fully assimilated into the body popular, taking his place among the dog acts and magicians. Vaudeville, for instance, the most diversified of the variety forms, prized a medium breadth that simply demanded the inclusion of such forms as opera, classical theatre, rhetoric, and ballet. Though presentations of sacred culture continued until the death of vaudeville, they never again assumed the central role they had held on the nineteenth-century legitimate stage. "Class" turns existed as simply another act in the vast panoply of

¹⁵⁰ Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow* 24.

entertainment. One must therefore question the victory and exclusivity of sacred culture suggested by Levine.

Vaudeville's uniquely diverse audiences had always demanded inclusion of sacred and popular culture offerings within a single bill. Ticket prices far lower than those found in the legitimate theatre allowed upper working class audience members—especially those with aspirations toward rising into the middle class—into the vaudeville house while the presence of sacred culture and its presumed edification encouraged middle class attendance. For managers intent upon a performance never running too long without pleasing each segment of the audience, the simple presence of multiple taste cultures ensured each bill would include acts that course throughout the cultural scale that elsewhere separated Shakespeare from clog dancing. Though few managers joined the 1912 newspaper critic in openly speaking of a “perfect bill balance,”¹⁵¹ the failure of a given performance was invariably blamed upon the bill lacking one of two elements: the “gin and fire”¹⁵² of the popular or the “singular purity [and] splendid schooling” of the sacred.¹⁵³ One critic of the Orpheum circuit shows, for example, argues that a “high class musical act [is] required” for a “rattling good show,”¹⁵⁴ while a second fingers more popular “singing, dancing and fun making” as “essential to the success of a vaudeville performance.”¹⁵⁵ Vaudeville was thus visualized as a genre whose content-aspect and cultural affinities required a breadth to match its audience base.

¹⁵¹ W.P. Strandborg, newspaper review, 1912, Pat Rooney II Collection, Harry Ransom Humanities Center, University of Texas at Austin, Austin, Texas.

¹⁵² M. J. Keating, Manager's Report Boston, Temple Theatre, 24 Aug. 1903, Keith-Albee Collection, University of Iowa, Iowa City.

¹⁵³ Newspaper review, 1911, Pat Rooney II Collection, Harry Ransom Humanities Center, University of Texas at Austin, Austin, Texas.

¹⁵⁴ Newspaper review, 1912, Pat Rooney II Collection, Harry Ransom Humanities Center, University of Texas at Austin, Austin, Texas.

¹⁵⁵ Newspaper review, 1911, Pat Rooney II Collection, Harry Ransom Humanities Center, University of Texas at Austin, Austin, Texas.

Calculating the creation of what one of their brethren termed “a happy family from soup to nuts,” managers therefore planned the sequence of turns with great care abetted by inexhaustible tinkering throughout the week. The very structure of the form encouraged such fixation. True to their roots in the aptly named “variety,” vaudeville managers attempted to construct bills that slightly jarred, rather than flowed, as they moved from one act to the next. The only particular logic, after all, to the sequential conjoining of Burt Jordan and Rosa Crouch (“sensational, grotesque and ‘buck’ dancers”) to the White Tscherkess Trio (“a singing turn of the operatic order”) rests in a formal demonstration of variety itself.¹⁵⁶ Managers and booking agents certainly could have constructed bills completely composed of turns more amenable to one another’s aesthetics; even a more varied bill might have been partitioned so as to better ally similar acts, grouping, for example, all musical numbers in the first half of the show or all of the high-class turns together. Vaudeville instead placed its polychotomous structure in the service of a happily discordant plurality, one in which the chief criterion for inclusion was the ability to arouse interest. Formal interstices annunciated difference; difference, in turn, lent the show the “spice of contrast” that one reviewer identified as the great structural pleasure of consuming a vaudeville performance.¹⁵⁷

In contrast, members of higher economic castes in attendance at conductor Theodore Thomas’ Chicago Symphony Orchestra in the late nineteenth-century were not only suffused with Wagner but to be wholly spared exposure to Sousa, the “march king” having been marked as beyond the cultural pale. “The great works of the great composers greatly performed,” Thomas instructed his audience. “The best and

¹⁵⁶Manager’s Report (Detroit), Temple Theatre, 01 Dec. 1902, Keith-Albee Collection, University of Iowa, Iowa City.

¹⁵⁷ Mac K., “In the Mimic World,” newspaper review, Pat Rooney II Collection, Harry Ransom Humanities Center, University of Texas at Austin, Austin, Texas.

profoundest art, these and these alone.”¹⁵⁸ This tendency toward stratification and exclusion of popular culture Levine identifies in the period’s concert halls and museums would have been foreign to vaudeville. Clearly, mature vaudeville did discriminate in its treatment of different cultural offerings. This discrimination, however, was based far more on the effect of each act upon the rhythm of the developing performance than on its perceived place within the increasingly fixed cultural strata of American entertainment. For the vaudeville manager, however, the placement of turns within a bill depended far less on the cultural stratum of the act than on its perceived effect in altering the rhythm of the show’s overall performance. A sacred culture act such as an opera aria required, rather than forbade, the following ministrations of a lowbrow comic duo in order that the audience might palpably appreciate the variety of the evening. Contrasting “conflict” (“a word that falls with ominous meaning upon the vaudeville manager’s [ears]”) with “variety” (“the paternal name of vaudeville”), renowned booker George Gottlieb, in a treatise on the “psychology” of constructing a show, enjoined his readers to seek a “unity” in variety.¹⁵⁹ Gottlieb, responsible for bringing acts to Martin Beck’s famed Palace Theatre, treasured the shifts he felt audiences sensed at the abutment of one turn to the next. Such movement quickened the pulse and furthered the interest of his audience members in “welcoming” the well-known acts at the end of the show. As the rhythm of the bill, not its various cultural strata, ruled Gottlieb’s schema, a roistering duet between classical violinists served the purpose of “waken[ing] the interest” of the audience in the tricky third spot of the bill far better than popular sentimental ballads

¹⁵⁸ Theodore Thomas qtd. in Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow* 118.

¹⁵⁹ Gottlieb 181.

played on the banjo.¹⁶⁰ In turn, a highly engaging troupe of bulldog pups might force a violinist playing a Chopin nocturne into a role as intermission accompanist.¹⁶¹

Vaudeville's insistence that high culture's offerings justify their inclusion, in part, through their structural utility ran counter to the sacred cultural claims of ineffable worth given voice by Thomas. In some sense, then, promulgators of sacred culture were correct in identifying vaudeville as an enemy of high art, inasmuch as the brevity of most spots on the bill invariably demanded cutting, distilling, or abstracting lengthy classical pieces into the bite-size portions demanded by a nine-act bill. The developing ethos of fawning subservience to the artist *cum* genius that informed the ongoing sacralization of culture, as Levine notes, demanded that "masterworks ... were to be performed in their entirety."¹⁶² Vaudeville, determined to pack an assortment of authorial voices into half the time consumed by a single symphony, opera, or performance of *Hamlet*, booked artists who had selected the choicest, often showiest segments of the work. In the eyes of many adherents of sacred culture, the inviolate masterworks were drawn and quartered in the name of consumption, with four hour operas whittled down to choice arias maddeningly abstracted from their original narrative service to a larger whole. To the vaudeville audience, however, the performer had been empowered to distill, alter, parody, and highlight sections of the work most fitted to given cities, performances (matinee or evening), or houses. The top-down culture advocated by Thomas, one that, like the period's trusts, attempted to force product on a consumer without the social or economic power to resist, never took firm root in the vaudeville house. During the period of the greatest efforts to craft

¹⁶⁰ George Gottlieb, "Psychology of the American Vaudeville Show From the Manager's Point of View," *American Vaudeville as Seen by its Contemporaries*, ed. Charles W. Stein (New York: Knopf, 1984) 179.

¹⁶¹ Newspaper article, *Oakland Tribune*, Harvard Theatre Collection, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

¹⁶² Levine 146.

a society fitted to the interests and rights of those most abused by unfettered late nineteenth-century capitalism, vaudeville provided resistance training for as little as a dime.

Ripped from the narrative moorings that provided richer context in a full performance, fragments of sacred culture often burst forth as pyrotechnic displays of bravura and versatility. Amelia Bingham, an actress playing the Keith circuit in the 1910s, toured with an act entitled “Big Moments From Great Plays.” Bingham would quickly relate the basic plot of a classic work to the audience before leaping into her rendition of “the crucial or vital moment” that provided the best performance opportunity.¹⁶³ Unconcerned with the totality that Thomas felt preserved the “spirit” of the piece, artists such as Bingham invested their efforts in making a connection with the audience by displaying their most winning skills. Opera vocalists usually remained in their *Fächer* when selecting pieces, but many would perform widely across the classical canon, cherry-picking moments they were certain would produce the ringing applause sure to guarantee future bookings. Often, concern with promoting easy digestion of sacred fare led to presentations that would have led Thomas and his ilk to apoplexy. Mme. Doree, a high class vocalist from Europe, toured with her band of “opera celebrities” in 1917. To the delight of one reviewer, Doree and her compatriots sung while “clustering about the piano exactly like the familiar advertisements for phonographs....”¹⁶⁴

Moreover, critics, managers, and audience members alike contended that their appreciation and edification of capsulated high culture provided as rich an aesthetic experience as they would have had from the entire piece. In the battle over the

¹⁶³ “Union Square Anniversary.” *Brooklyn Times*. 30 Sep. 1913, Harvard Theatre Collection, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

¹⁶⁴ “Keith’s—A Christmas Bill,” *Washington Post*. 25 Dec. 1917, Harvard Theatre Collection, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

structural integrity of sacred works, members of vaudeville's varied taste cultures insisted that the essential pleasures of sacred culture could be communicated in brief fragments. It was, for an audience lacking the greater income and leisure time of wealthier patrons, supporting important resistance toward those who would deny them the elevation presumed of costly, lengthy works.

Vaudeville's integration of popular and sacred culture acts frustrates any attempts to fix the taste culture of its adherents at a single point in Levine's disciplining highbrow/lowbrow continuum. The intermingling, as we have seen, certainly occurred on a macro level due to the variety nature of the bill itself. Ludwig Wullner, the previously mentioned liedersinger who so charmed the better citizens of 1912 Oakland, found his Strauss offering joined on the bill by a trick pianist, a singer of popular songs (whose "He Was Nice" warns of chance acquaintances), four Greek dancers, a clown and veil dance act, barrel jumpers, a two man patter act, and "Ergatti and His Lilliputians." But for the lack of any central act, the cumulative performance appears very like one that might have been staged prior to the suggested historical rise of uncontaminated sacred culture.

Vaudeville after 1890 often incorporated products from different taste cultures within single acts. Sometimes the intermingling was quite basic, with a performer—often a musician—playing both popular and classical tunes. Violinski, an adept, classically trained violinist, mixed "his classical with that of the popular sort in an original way, making him an instantaneous favorite."¹⁶⁵ Mlle. Donald-Ayer, prima donna of the Boston Grand Opera Company, entertained her 1916 audience with "a full voice that appeals to everyone, whether she sings grand opera or popular

¹⁶⁵ Newspaper review, 21 Jan. 1912, Pat Rooney II Collection, Harry Ransom Humanities Center, University of Texas at Austin, Austin, Texas.

songs.”¹⁶⁶ Even the federal government got into the mix. A few months before the end of World War I, members of the U.S. Navy Jazz Band, an emergency replacement act at the Palace, “showed themselves proficient both in the classics and the sort of melody called jazz, with the audience inclined to favor the latter variety.”¹⁶⁷

Such simple combinations had been present in variety performance for decades. They became newly powerful in the early twentieth-century when the economic elite identified the preservation of uncontaminated sacred culture as a social corrective to economic imperilment. The limits that the new federal income tax, workplace safety regulations, and collective bargaining power began to place upon acquisition of wealth framed Progressivism’s redemptive measures as a dangerous sea change for those who supported the New York Philharmonic’s years of placidly swimming in red ink. Maintaining discrete taste cultures, by setting the limits on what opera or Shakespeare were and where they could go, the econo-cultural elite attempted to wrest treasured elements of popular performance from lower economic strata. By the simple act of mixing products from newly segregated taste cultures into a single act’s performance, vaudevillians refused to cede this ground.

Other acts braided taste cultures in more radical fashion, creating acts that completely demolished any final sense of where either the popular or the sacred rested. Le Troup Fantastique entered the stage to the music from Gounod’s *Faust*, carrying with them a working model of a scenic dragon with “working eyes [and] steam spit from his mouth....” As the music swelled from the orchestra pit, the three woman act accompanied the opera with a triple gavotte clog dance that culminated in the discovery of Mephisto.¹⁶⁸ The Markee Brothers, one man straight and the other in

¹⁶⁶ Newspaper review (Majestic Theatre, San Antonio), 13 Mar. 1916, Pat Rooney II Collection, Harry Ransom Humanities Center, University of Texas at Austin, Austin, Texas.

¹⁶⁷ “U.S. Navy Jazz Band A Hit,” *New York Times*, 16 Apr. 1918.

¹⁶⁸ Manager’s Report (Providence), 13 Oct 1902, Keith-Albee Collection, University of Iowa, Iowa City.

blackface, ran their 1916 turn from a coon song to a cello solo to an *a cappella* duet of the prison song from *Il Trovatore*. (It was, a manager sighed, a “very ordinary act.”¹⁶⁹) And in an amazingly convoluted chain of identifications and performance styles, Don Alfonso, a classical violinist from a Mexican circus, followed his rendition of Liszt’s “Liebesträume” with an encore in which he burlesqued Polish pianist (and future prime minister) Ignacy Paderewski playing ragtime.¹⁷⁰

Often, vaudevillians frustrated final sacralization of highbrow culture by oddly combining the content and the manner of execution. One cello and harpist duo in the early 1910s began with classical selections before progressing on to ragtime pieces split between the two concert instruments.¹⁷¹ Polk and Kollins, “the best banjoists in the country,” in one manager’s estimation, won a curtain call and a “great round of applause” in 1903 following their admirably “businesslike” selection from Rossini’s *Semiramide*.¹⁷² Animal acts, ostensibly present to entertain the children (and ladies), also played across the gap that normally precluded them from taking part in highbrow performance. Chester’s Canines De Luxe, a troupe of trained dogs, amused the audience by dutifully marching on stage and setting up in “tableaus and bas-relief poses” from a wide range of paintings and statuary.¹⁷³ Such acts tore apart what had become a series of concretized linkages within sacred culture, most of which could be expressed as an “index of negative characteristics” (to use Werner Solor’s phrase): cellos did not play ragtime, banjos did not play opera, and dogs did not reproduce Michelangelo. Instead, vaudevillians placed the performer as the author of cultural

¹⁶⁹ Manager’s Report (Hudson Theatre, Union Hill, New Jersey) 25 Jan. 1911, Keith-Albee Collection, University of Iowa, Iowa City.

¹⁷⁰ “Pantages Fifth Week Starts With Big Bill,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 29 Jan. 1912.

¹⁷¹ C. E. Barnes, Manager’s Report, Philadelphia, 16 Jan. 1911. Submitted by C.E. Barnes.

¹⁷² S.K. Hogdgon, Manager’s Report (New York), 29 Jun. 1903, Keith-Albee Collection, University of Iowa, Iowa City.

¹⁷³ “Henry E. Dixey at the New Brighton,” *Brooklyn Standard*, 12 Aug. 1913.

distinctions, while allowing the audience to license the performance based on the only metric that mattered: the ability to please.

Many in the country found these admixtures reductive and frivolous, contemplating the plenitude of taste cultures as a hopeless hodge-podge of discordant performance styles and types of content. Others refused to take the highbrow fare seriously once it had been “compromised” by the self-taught banjoist or dog trainer. One newspaper critic of a 1926 show, deep into vaudeville’s dotage, found that the mixture of taste cultures created “a bill that is plenteous in matter, frothy with nonsense, with just enough quality to give it edge, and so inconsequential that it can be forgotten without a moment’s qualm....”¹⁷⁴ Yet some members of various contemporary movements within high art considered vaudeville’s vigorous mélange of styles, authoritative audience, and authorial performer as having conspired to create “a kind of artistic reaction to our native social repressiveness.”¹⁷⁵ Literary critic Edmund Wilson, as literary theorist Ron Berman notes, found that vaudeville’s mixture of schools and styles, fired by a spontaneous engagement between performer and spectator, made it “an equivalent of Dada.” Vaudeville performance, in which vaudevillian and audience member reclaimed and remade cultural forms ossified and sealed after the rise of sacred culture, rose for Wilson, Berman writes, as “a modernist urban art full of reflections of current experience.” Moreover, Wilson recognized that the vaudeville playhouse enabled a “self-conscious sense of authorship” within its performers.¹⁷⁶

Early in his discussion of American taste cultures, Herbert Gans notes that the phrases “mass” and “popular” impel “analysis into an *a priori* dichotomy that hides

¹⁷⁴ E.F.M., “A to M, Artists and ‘Ams,” Boston Transcript, 03 Aug. 1926.

¹⁷⁵ Ron Berman, “Vaudeville Philosophers: ‘The Killers,’” *Twentieth Century Literature*, Vol. 45, No. 1 (Spring, 1999) 80.

¹⁷⁶ Berman 81.

more than it reveals.”¹⁷⁷ To speak of “mass” culture, he writes, one “suggests an undifferentiated collectivity, even a mob, rather than people as individuals or members of a group . . .” Gans instead opts for the “more positive terms like ‘popular culture. . .’”¹⁷⁸ As he subsequently argues for the peaceful (or at least less antagonistic) mingling of taste cultures, Gans, of course, does not acknowledge that his “positive” terminology effects an equally pejorative stance. While some members of high culture might bear the mark of unpopularity as a badge of hard-won honor, the semantic weight of outcast status within American discourse is no easy burden.

Ultimately, Gans finds that separate taste cultures are inevitable, in spite of the “cultural heroism” of the cultural elite who attempt to share their riches with the masses (e.g., public television). He regards popular culture as a mostly benign force in American life, the necessary alternative of expression for those with less money and education. It is not, he assures us, “a social problem either for the majority of its audience or for high culture.”¹⁷⁹ Yet if the presence of popular culture is not an acute threat to the body politic, it at least represents a chronic condition worthy of further attention.

American society should pursue policies that would maximize educational opportunities for all so as to permit everyone to choose from higher taste cultures . . .¹⁸⁰ [for] it would be fair to say that the higher cultures are better than the lower ones, and that high culture is better than all the rest.¹⁸¹

¹⁷⁷ Herbert J. Gans, “Popular Culture in America: Social Problem in a Mass Society or Social Asset in a Pluralist Society?” *Literary Taste, Culture and Mass Communication, Vol. 1: Culture and Mass Culture*, Eds. Peter Davison, Rolf Meyersohn, and Edward Shils. (Cambridge: Chadwick-Healy, 1978) 235.

¹⁷⁸ Gans 234-235.

¹⁷⁹ Gans 303.

¹⁸⁰ Gans 287.

¹⁸¹ Gans 285.

Clearly, popular culture operated in a far more decisive, sculpting fashion in the vaudeville house. No slave to the “higher taste cultures” Gans viewed as the pinnacle of American society, vaudeville instead charted an ever changing course between the Charybdis of the ossified sacred and the Scylla of the impotent popular. As well, the segregation Levine locates elsewhere failed to shape the vaudeville house’s understanding of cultural braiding and cross-pollination. Moreover, the popular remained deeply in productive conversation and playful, familiar discord with its sacred counterpart. For the price of the ticket vaudeville audiences had not only gained entrance to the elegant “pleasure palaces” that rose as cathedrals of modern urbanism, but also maintained the right to incisively reshape, rather than simply consume, received culture. Clearly, the middle class passivity that would trudge in gray flannel lockstep in the coming decades remained foreign to many within the confines of the vaudeville playhouse.

Variety’s evolution into vaudeville inevitably compromised the former genre’s ability to coalesce its audience, unified by economic class, taste culture, and gender, around issues demanding productive advocacy. As well, the new genre of entertainment, whose broad cultural aims and affordable ticket prices often grouped together otherwise disparate audiences, no doubt encouraged the very massification of the audience Gans resists in his half-hearted nudge toward the “popular.” Yet vaudeville succeeded, in the final respect, in resisting the general shift in American culture toward benumbed applause for cultural form already insidiously beyond the reach of those who consume or produce them.

Important for the purposes of Progressivism, the shifts in vaudeville’s approach to taste cultures and class distinctions helped re-order traditional offerings so that they might be suited to the form and its devotees. The parallels between sacred cultural offerings and the era’s trusts are startling and pervasive. Both presumed that

those they considered abject—be they the “children of toil” who suffered under abuse of labor or those considered too ignorant or lowbrow to fully appreciate a symphony—necessarily lacked the competency and wherewithal to impact the hegemony to its benefit. Both denied agency and powers of communal redress to those most affected by exclusion. By co-opting and transforming sacred cultural offerings, vaudevillians and their audience members rejected the notion that culture was a thing to be inherited and preserved even when its operated in a fashion contrary to one’s desires. Gestures such as playing Mozart on a banjo therefore played into Progressive politics in two fashions. Firstly, the new presentation translated the hegemony’s preferred form into a style of performance in which the popular audience could exercise a greater degree of expertise and connoisseurship. Arguably, an audience member with a thorough knowledge of the intricacies of ragtime might apprehend a banjo version of a Mozart aria far better than a high-class auditor with only a moderate degree of classical music training attempting to listen to the original orchestration. Progressive reformers reflected this understanding in their embrace of popular iconography (e.g., Jacob Riis’ photos) and evocative prose (e.g., Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle*). Next, claiming and transforming received cultural forms represented the best and truest inclinations of the reform element in a constituent democracy: the operations of the society, economy, and culture should be designed so as to ensure the greatest degree of satisfaction for the greatest number of people. The idea of an elite, be it economic or cultural, determining the proper underpinnings and functions of the nations was, more than anything, what Progressivism stood in opposition to. At their best, Progressivism and vaudeville alike forced economic classes and taste cultures into a position of susceptibility to the will of the informed greater public.

Perhaps nothing is more telling than that performers from outside the genre sought out vaudeville’s ability to address the social inequity subtly wrought through

the imposition of false cultural hierarchies. Deep in the midst of the landmark Actors Equity strike of 1919, stars from the legitimate stage, denied the union for which vaudeville performers had struggled twenty years previously, staged a vaudeville show at the Lexington Theatre in New York City. Partly a fundraiser, the evening bill was also a demonstration of the essential relationship that Jerzy Grotowski would later find at the heart of theatre: that between performer and audience member. Weighed down by the financial hardship of shuttered legitimate theatres, the actors discovered that they could bring together their various skills and create an evening of deeply entertaining and politically provocative performance, all under the guise of the “frivolous” form so often derided by devotees of the “higher arts.”

One stirring moment in the performance involved vaudeville comedian Ed Wynn, who had volunteered to appear in support of the legit actors. Wynn had a unique vantage point on the ability of vaudeville performance to reflexively engage performer and spectator. He traced his own entrancement with the genre to a performance he attended at the age of twelve. Pulled from the audience by famed magician Howard Thurston, Wynn interrupted the set routine and offered to perform Thurston’s trick for him. Thurston, “as though delighted to meet someone who shared his occult powers,” halted the act, removed the boy’s blindfold, and gave Wynn the chance. Years later, the now renowned vaudeville comedian mused that “I think Thurston actually welcomed interruptions like mine, which challenged his power over the audience. For years, he was, to me, the ideal showman.”¹⁸² This evening in 1919, Wynn again stood up in the house, this time to announce that his vaudeville theatre had just presented him with a court injunction forbidding him to take the stage. Instead, the waggish vaudevillian held the audience spellbound for twenty minutes

¹⁸² Ed Wynn qtd. in Anthony Slide, *The Vaudevillians: A Dictionary of Vaudeville Performers* (Westport, CT: Arlington House, 1981) 171.

with a description of what the act *would* have been had his masters not forbade it. The audience joined him in standing during their ovation to the tale.

Each act on the bill incorporated the single word “equity” into the content of the turn, though there was “no apparent purpose on the part of the various performers to win sympathy for the strikers....” In the finale, however, it became clear that the actors specifically not only chose a vaudeville format for their rallying protest evening, but hungered for the ability to meaningfully play across taste cultures in a way that would have been out of place in any other current American theatrical genre. The entire cast mounted the boards and staged “a dramatic and impressive travesty of Marc Antony’s oration from Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*.” The scene had been heavily adapted for the purposes of the evening, but was rewritten in blank verse. The one-night vaudevillians had changed each instance of “Caesar” to “Equity;” “Romans” was replaced by “managers.” At the culmination of this final act—in equal parts popular parody and intimate, contextually appropriate employment of highbrow culture—the Lexington’s “huge stage was filled with actors and actresses, who groaned responses until the oration brought them to the climax where they rolled up their sleeves to fight for Equity. The house stood and cheered.”¹⁸³

¹⁸³ “Striking Players Give Vaudeville at the Lexington,” *New York Herald*, 19 Aug. 1919.

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CHAPTER 2

“THE CREEDLESS CRITIC:” COLLUSION AND POWER IN VAUDEVILLE PERFORMANCE

Writing to a New York readership as vaudeville entered its death throes in the late 1920s, Eunice Barnard eulogized a “big, boisterous American wench,” one who “has written the nation’s songs, but cares not who makes its laws....”¹⁸⁴ Barnard’s fond limning of the genre as so much folderol was distressingly common throughout the life of vaudeville. Most of the period’s critical writings find cultural purchase for the form only in its ability to elide the complexities of the modern American condition through slavish adherence to inconsequentiality. “It exacts no intellectual activity on the part of those who gathered to enjoy,” contentedly sighed critic Hartley Davis. “Its essence is an enemy to responsibility, to worries, to all the little bills of life.”¹⁸⁵

Vaudeville’s management cannily promulgated this pacific reputation in response to the period’s worriment over the stresses of modernity. Seeking a niche in the crowded American entertainment marketplace, the genre frequently suggested regular attendance might inoculate against what one vaudevillian termed the “noise, confusion, scope and power of modern activity....”¹⁸⁶ William James concurred with the type of antidote vaudeville suggested. Concerned about the “turbulent billows” that worry created within one’s “mental hygiene,” he compared the modern American to a “bicycle chain wound too tight.” Only by changing this injurious “American

¹⁸⁴ Eunice Fuller Barnard, “Nimble Vaudeville A Centenarian,” 1927, *New York Times Magazine*, Harvard Theatre Collection, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

¹⁸⁵ Hartley Davis, “In Vaudeville,” *Everybody’s Magazine* August 1905: 231.

¹⁸⁶ Anatole Friedland, “Twentieth Century Review,” 01 Jul. 1930, Olson Collection, The United Vaudeville Artists, Inc. Protected Files, University of Southern California, Los Angeles: File #8606.

mental habit,” he suggested, could one regain one’s “effective power.”¹⁸⁷ Similarly noting “nerves strung to top pitch,” one writer assured vaudeville audiences that “the capacity for peaceful penetration” remained the form’s greatest strength.¹⁸⁸ Indeed, many who entered the vaudeville house—among them some of vaudeville’s greatest admirers—often echoed the Empire Theatre’s proud 1901 trumpeting of one vaudevillian having “nothing on her mind but hair.”¹⁸⁹

Prizing a topicality that seemed provincial to many and embracing a breadth of interest met with suspicion by propagators of “sacred culture,” vaudeville, stentorian voice of the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century American theatre, found itself lost to these swirling backwaters of critical disregard in quick succession to its actual death in the early 1930s. Vaudeville managers must assume part of the blame for this withering in remembrance. In linking esteem to popularity—it had to be valuable, they often suggested, if so many people were paying to attend—vaudeville’s decline in popularity discouraged critical inquiries into its efficacy and importance. The shift of patronage toward other products (in particular, cinema) condemned the genre as unworthy, a popular form with few patrons. Sadly, such devaluation continues to obscure the extent to which this often bracingly political and avowedly popular genre of performance enabled the muscular involvement of the citizenry during its reign.

In the following chapter I wish to examine the nature in which vaudeville prepared the way for and abetted the reforms of the Progressive Era, a series of socio-economic reorganizations foundational to an understanding of American pluralism, and engendered a brand of cultural dialogue essential for a critical democracy. I address vaudeville’s engagement of certain Progressive foci (e.g., women’s suffrage),

¹⁸⁷ William James, *Talks to Teachers on Psychology: and to Students on Some of Life's Ideals* (New York, 1899):

¹⁸⁸ Mary Cass, “The Great American Art,” *The New Republic* 22 Nov. 1922: 335.

¹⁸⁹ Program, The Empire Theatre (Cleveland) 21 Jan. 1901, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library, New York City, New York.

but am no less concerned with its creation of a venue and aesthetic that facilitated an ethos of reform and address. Moreover, in drawing upon both variety and vaudeville, I establish an arena of historical consideration that understands popular performance to have functioned in a fashion consonant with the desires of Progressive reformers.

This chapter therefore concerns itself with vaudeville's embrace of heightened audience agency, and topical, evolving, and ideologically diverse material. As a critical appreciation of these facets is crucial for a full understanding of the restive, interrogating crowd that peopled the vaudeville house, I pay particular attention to the fashion in which the form attempted to speak in concert with the specific concerns of its audience members. As well, I concentrate on those means of acting—on the stage and within the house—that drew upon the continually evolving content-aspect of the various turns in a creation of meaning. Ultimately, I hope to tease out the frequently employed (and to my mind, hopelessly elastic) term “vaudeville aesthetic,” fixed in its own (Groucho) Marxist static of baggy-panted, simple disruption, into a more critically engaged understanding of a dynamic vaudeville process.

The facets of vaudeville performance discussed in this chapter—audience-performer engagement, contestation of authority, currency, and topical content-aspect—formed a vaudeville process that enabled the creation of an engaged citizenry during the crucial period of American Progressivism. Audience members developed an ethos of productive, real-time engagement, learning all the while how to discuss matters of critical import under the watch of persistently censorious corporate management. Vaudevillians, formerly in thrall to variety's single-proprietor theatre manager, arose as independent specialists, working class analogues of the middle class professional, capable of working in concert with their audience base in creation of a vigorously engaged cultural product.

Managers appear to have authentically envisioned themselves as more immediately subservient to the demands of the general populace, bowing to their audiences as an “army” or “jury” time and again, even as they wrestled with concerns about decorum, class, and power. In large part, this resulted from three related factors. First, the managerial class in vaudeville failed to adopt a reliably comprehensive model for enforcing its will upon either audience or performers. In this, it suffered from all the encumbrances and few of the benefits of a corporate model for entertainment. A chain’s houses had to adhere to guiding principles established by the central office, but were more beholden to their local audience for success than any approval from corporate headquarters. Because of this, the incentive to oppress local culture in any effective programmatic fashion, an essential element of other rapidly nationalizing industries, failed to take hold. Second, for all their stolid pronouncements of allegiance to polite culture and its ethos of docile respectability, managers could not save their jobs, keep their theatres open, or outdraw competing houses simply by presenting the prim visage that so commonly peered out of the era’s photographic cabinet cards. They were first and foremost showmen with the responsibility to put on performances of “gin and fire” for an incredibly diverse audience. As long as they could keep the stage clear of the more flagrant instances of sexual suggestiveness and rank obscenity, most other managerial values became matters of nightly and weekly relativity. Finally, unlike masters in most industries, managers in vaudeville could not interrupt the work without destroying the product. The period of the performance, as we shall see, thus granted the spectator and vaudevillian a period of licensed freedom during which the two parties could engage one another in unpredictable, pleasurable, familiar, and inventive fashions.

Thankfully, the fitful shattering of authority and polite culture all occurred in a form whose breadth of interests matched those of the nation it entertained. The range

of topics and positions present on the vaudeville stage—homelessness, mothers-in-law, adulterated foodstuffs, tap dancing, and gender inequality in the white collar workplace—allowed the era’s “journalistic mind” to scan widely across the terrain of issues coalesced under the diverse interests of Progressivism. For a nation intent upon congregating in redress of grave social injustices, the example of merrily functional pluralism in its most popular entertainment proved both essential and instructive.

At the point of its earliest development, vaudeville was not as dissimilar to other American theatrical entertainments as it would become by its demise, though it would be fairer to say that the bulk of American performance affected this remove by gravitating away from time-honored traditions of comportment and spectatorship. As Lawrence Levine has noted, interaction between audience and performer had long been an often harrowing, often invigorating facet of most forms of American theatrical performance in the early- to mid-nineteenth century. Audiences routinely called for reprises, hissed drunken actors off the stage, discussed the program during its unfolding, and challenged stage villains to fights. When flush with approval, actors could be enjoined (and sometimes forced) into repetitions of particularly popular parts of the performance.¹⁹⁰ Such interaction was not limited to the playhouse. Forms as varied as the symphonic band and the dime museum relied upon the audience as an intrusive and productive element in their work.

Indeed, though modes of comportment certainly differed between various forms of entertainment, at the point of variety’s greatest prominence all levels of American taste culture incorporated strong elements of audience interactivity and productivity. It was expected that being at an event necessarily enabled one to become a participant in one fashion or another. In part, this understanding lay in a culture that

¹⁹⁰ For a good discussion of audience and order see Lawrence Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1988): 171-242

valued this interactivity in other venues as well, such as political debates that quite often included spirited contributions from those in attendance. In the entertainment sphere, though the roles were certainly different, the act of purchasing a ticket granted one no less a place in the evening than those who would appear on stage. Most managers and fellow audience members appeared to draw the line only at the point where the act was unable to continue. The division that would soon wedge audiences from popular and sacred forms apart from one another would not visit the American stage until later in the century.

The effervescent admixture of hope for favor and fear of disapprobation experienced by those in popular performance would not have been unfamiliar to their fellows in the legitimate theatre before 1880. The works preparing the way for realism, most strikingly melodramas and local color plays, enabled a performer-spectator dynamic in which, to invert Gassner's phrase, the play was not overheard but heard. Unencumbered by the inert voyeurism that would soon be enforced in the legitimate theatre by a darkened auditorium, fading of direct address, and increased use of a multi-plane staging that drew the performer from the foot lights (and hence the spectators), audiences of the pre-realistic theatre engaged a developing performance with a vibrant interactivity that ran the gamut from pithy rejoinders to no small number of brawls and riots.

Rose Bank has persuasively argued that such demonstration and agency represented a fairly new phenomenon in the American playhouse, one that reflected the rise of Jacksonian democratic ideals in the face of European-tinged aristocratic privilege.¹⁹¹ In this, the interactivity that flowered in American performance from the late 1820s through the rise of realism in the late 1870s must be understood less as an

¹⁹¹ See Rosemary K. Bank, *Theatre Culture in America, 1825-1860* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1997) for a compelling discussion of the "democratic" ideal in the American playhouse as a result of both marketing and genuine cultural shift.

inheritance from the roiling Elizabethan stage—endless iterations of an apple-tossing ur-audience whose origin fades into a miasma of dimly remembered bear-baiting—than as a cultural force that both reflected and drove the gathering forces of working class suffrage in the United States. Comparable to the post-Civil War wave of labor unrest, heightened interaction in the antebellum theatre sought to place the audience as co-authors of the performance, on equal footing and in reciprocal dialogue with the performers. American theatre had long been a venue housing restless audiences. These groups understood that their actions during the event—their boos, catcalls, thunderous applause, calls for encores, and conversations amongst themselves—carried great semantic weight. They not only absorbed the fare offered to them, but interrogated it and individuated it in a fashion that stamped each theatre, each section of the house, and each performance as a chorus of actions played by management, spectator, and performer.¹⁹²

Two developments now imperiled the survival of such productive interaction. I have discussed the first—the employment of class distinctions to control audience behavior—in Chapter 1 but it is worth briefly returning to this issue. Gerald Grob, placing Jacksonian labor reform as an essential element in the “humanitarian movements of antebellum America,” argues that the era’s labor movements founded a legacy with pervasive influence. Less interested in the comparatively amiable process of collective bargaining than their trade unionist counterparts, succeeding movements in the Jacksonian strain “sought to organize the entire producing class into a single

¹⁹² As Peggy Phelan and Phillip Auslander, among others, have argued, all such actions have a degree of agency within the theatre. As slight a response as a whistle or muffled cry from the audience may radically alter the stage event. As Phelan makes clear, even the presence of the spectatorial body in a shared space can re-author an event. For the purposes of this discussion, I speak of the productive audience member as one who consciously asserts its unique will in the creation of the theatrical event. See Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (New York: Routledge, 1993) and Phillip Auslander, *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

irresistible coalition that would work toward . . . the establishment of a new society.”¹⁹³ The working class “humanitarian efforts” lauded by Grob eschewed reconciliation; they sought reconstitution.

The enervation of audience agency during the same period must therefore be viewed in the shadow of a cresting wave of popular democratic reform within the antebellum working class that threatened to break hard and high upon the pinnacle of industrial capitalism. I am suggesting that what Bruce McConachie has politely termed “the accepted relationship in the [late nineteenth-century realistic] theatre between actors and audiences” masks the force with which this polite understanding displaced the audience from its traditional role as producers of culture during the theatrical performance.¹⁹⁴ The rapid quashing of Jacksonian restiveness, to draw upon Paulo Freire’s theories of pedagogy, shifted the audience to a “banking” model of culture that ultimately devalued their presence. By attending “polite” and “high class” entertainment that increasingly sought one’s silence, one became a borrower, rather than a depositor of culture. This displacement into object position stoked what Robert Wiebe isolates as a type of proto-Progressivism in the mid-nineteenth century. Precluded by the manager from generating resistant culture in theatre, audiences, like Wiebe’s mineworkers, would soon make use of the variety theatre to realize their burgeoning and yet frustrated “desire for self-determination.”¹⁹⁵

The second development, the rise of American realism, had an equally profound impact on the nation’s theatres after 1870. No clean historical division between neo-classicism, melodrama, and realism exist in American theatre history. If anything, melodrama did not so much link neo-classical and classical European-based

¹⁹³ Gerald N. Grob, “The Knight of Labor and the Trade Unions, 1878-1886,” *The Journal of Economic History*, XVIII (June, 1958) 177.

¹⁹⁴ Bruce A. McConachie, “Pacifying American Audiences, 1820-1900,” *For Fun and Profit: The Transformation of Leisure into Consumption* ed. Richard Butsch (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1990) 48.

¹⁹⁵ Robert H. Wiebe, *The Search for Order, 1877-1920* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967) 55.

plays with the later realistic works, but suffused the offerings of the entire nineteenth century on the American shores. Ante-bellum classical performances, such as Edwin Forrest's *King Lear* and *The Merchant of Venice*, were noted as much for their deeply-wrung passions as for their nods toward realistic characterization. Even after the appearance and maturation of American realism, many of the most popular works liberally borrowed and reveled in conventions from melodrama. David Belasco's *The Girl of the Golden West* (1905), for example, stripped of the fantastic naturalism of the production effects (e.g., sunrises, snowstorms) survives on the page quite comfortably as something that might have been written thirty years earlier. Yet the historian's frequently slaked hunger to insert realism's dominance at the very point when variety gave way to vaudeville, the early 1880s, speaks to the degree to which realism was beginning to infiltrate the legitimate stage. The new conventions of realism spanned broadly across many facets of dramatic construction and theatrical presentation: characterization, psychology, social mission, special effects, scenery, and properties, to name but a few. Perhaps nowhere did realism's growing influence so affect American audiences, however—audiences conditioned to *act* in the theatre—as in its embrace of voyeurism. In the new theatre, as John Gassner argues, the play was not meant to be heard, but overheard.¹⁹⁶ The audience was still there, but the performance now imagined an invisible fourth wall behind which it must be sequestered and past which it was not encouraged to act.

Voyeurism's manifold pleasures in the flowering realistic theatre included fewer opportunities for spectators to forge firm links between the consuming, practical concerns of their own lives outside the theatre and the substance of the theatrical performance. Instead, the aesthetic of realism placed the audience member at what Edward Bullough famously terms a "psychical distance" from its art, a remove in

¹⁹⁶ John Gassner, *Form and Idea in Modern Theatre* (New York: Dryden, 1956) 26.

which “the personal relation” of the audience member to art “has been, so to speak, filtered. It has been cleared of the practical, concrete nature of its appeal....”¹⁹⁷

Bullough’s distance, surmises Daphna Ben Chaim, ultimately maintains “its effectiveness partially due to its remoteness from the spectator’s ‘personal’ life.”¹⁹⁸ If succeeding plays in the realistic vein tackled subject matter as richly studded with cultural and economic import as slavery, women’s rights and the plight of the immigrants—and they did—their consumers were expected to observe the performance as *a* story, rather than *their* story. Additionally, the rise of the “fourth wall” convention meant that audience members evidently engaged in producing culture during the performance destroyed that same performance. Audience engaging devices such as the soliloquy, aside, and call-and-response, each with a long history in American performance, now began to fade from the stage. As well, spectators began to fade from one another’s sight. Plunged into the darkness of the auditorium by the more tightly circumscribed illumination provided by gas (and eventually, electric) lighting, audience members, unable to speak to the actors or see one another, were called upon in realism to process the performance internally.

These losses were not, of course, absolutely crippling. Identification with characters much more like oneself than in melodrama, a gift of realistic character construction and acting styles, undoubtedly allowed audience members to more fully invest themselves within the dramatic situations they saw unfolding before them. This was particularly true in the social problems plays, the sub-genre that sought to inspire socially corrective action on the part of the audience following the performance. In 1897 playwright James A. Herne, noted for his early use of local color and later

¹⁹⁷ Edward Bullough, “‘Psychical Distance’ as a Factor in Art and as an Aesthetic Principle,” *British Journal of Psychology* 5 (June 1912): 91.

¹⁹⁸ Daphna Ben Chaim, *Distance in the Theatre: The Aesthetics of Audience Response* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1981) 9.

embrace of realism, argued that a usable truth is capable of fulfilling this “higher purpose” only when it “perpetuates the everyday life of its time....”¹⁹⁹ Herne’s conditions for inspiring effective audience power, power that actually changed the life-world conditions the play addressed rather than strutted and fretted with the theatre alone, frequently ran aground of restive, interactive audiences who refused to let the realism take root. As well, interrogatory audiences were frequently reactionary. As many of the social inequities targeted by Progressivism challenged conventions (e.g., women’s suffrage, immigrant enfranchisement) realism, with its formal demand for silence and personal contemplation, allowed issues of greater contention to the hegemony a fuller hearing. The “new woman” addressed again and again in early realism represented to many not simply a novelty, but a profound social, economic, and cultural shift, one that arguably benefited from being immune within the theatre to being spoken over and interfered with as frequently as was her life-world counterpart. Indeed, one might argue that *only* in overhearing some material could it be heard at all.

Additionally, the legitimate stage, particularly in its realistic works, often proved far more adept than variety/vaudeville at raising these issues in the first place. A study of the respective histories of both genres demonstrates that nearly all of the larger targets of the reform movements, be they temperance, workplace safety, or women’s rights, appeared on the legitimate stage (often in realistic fare) far before they climbed the variety/vaudeville fare. The greater length of the individual works (up to three hours in the legitimate theatre against roughly 10-45 minutes on the variety stage) allowed realistic playwrights to more fully unfold a question, challenge their own assumptions, and introduce unsettling topics and figures with a depth and

¹⁹⁹ James A. Herne, “Art for Truth’s Sake in Drama,” *American Drama and Its Critics*, ed. Alan S. Downer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965) 9-10.

complexity that often ameliorated their capacity to unnerve. Edward Sheldon's *Nigger* (1909), a realistic heir to Dion Boucicault's melodramatic *The Octoroon* (1859), examines the morally destitute presence of racism in America. Though Sheldon's work is not the bracing stuff of the later mid-twentieth century civil rights movement, he nonetheless allows his central character, a white Southern governor who has recently discovered that he is of partial African American extraction, a dialogic examination of self and station that would have been impossible within the tighter confines of the variety stage; certainly, it could not have been accomplished with resistant audiences blocking the material.

As well, the demand for near immediate approbation from the variety/vaudeville audience necessitated that the piece "hit" early in its appearance. Because of this, pieces in variety theatre often played upon cultural memes that had accompanied the spectators into the theatre. Therefore, variety/vaudeville frequently depended upon the legitimate theatre to lodge representations and modes of performance deeply within American culture so that it might puckishly parody or quickly engage them. As Levine observes, that which "is not familiar" made for poor fodder in early American popular theatre.²⁰⁰ It is unsurprising, therefore, that many of the most interesting sketches concerning the "new woman" of the Progressive era made their debut on the vaudeville stage over fifteen years after Ibsen's Nora first slammed the door in 1879.

Acknowledging all this, the model of spectatorship that began to grow with the realistic theatre—one in which an interactive audience buffeted up against the new wall that ran the length of the apron—became an ineffective sole model for enacting Progressivism's reforms. The loudening cry for silence in realism might provide an arena for contemplation and absorption of challenging material, but it lacked the

²⁰⁰ Levine 4.

communal action and immediacy of engagement that Progressive reforms ultimately demanded. To be an effective helpmeet to the Progressive era, live performance demanded a complimentary form to realism, one that allowed a wide array of classes, ethnicities, genders, and taste cultures to engage the most pungent topics of its concern. The interactive mode of spectatorship that appeared to be swiftly exiting much of the American theatre instead ran to the refuge of its variety entertainments.

Lawrence Levine argues that the American opera house, in addition to the legitimate stage, also became a staging ground for this shift away from entertainment toward the public consumption of sacred culture for the sake of being observed doing so. The period's opera houses, formerly home to a knowledgeable, variegated urban community of interactive spectators, increasingly became "less a center for entertainment than a sacred source of cultural enlightenment...."²⁰¹ Conversely, patrons of the variety hall disdained the obedient throng sitting placidly by in other venues. "I'm a different sort of chap," claimed a character in one of its popular songs, "No fun in that I see." While audience members in the legitimate theatre, opera, and symphony demonstrated acquiescence to the authority of the performer and manager, variety audiences continued to exercise the muscular, sculpting influence that might be expected of those who glanced down and saw, according to the same song, "hands with honest labor browned."²⁰²

Patrons of variety halls in the 1860s and 1870s, in particular, enjoyed great notoriety for their insistence at not simply appreciating, but also joining the development of the theatrical moment. In jotted notes for a never-realized autobiography, hoofer Pat Rooney II recalls that his father, a famed variety performer, often faced an unruly gallery with apples at the ready; Rooney I's first moments on

²⁰¹ Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow* 104.

²⁰² Tony Pastor, "In the Bowery," *Since the Soup House Moved Away* (New York: A.J. Fisher, 1874).

stage were consumed with smiling at the gallery in hopes of forestalling the storm.²⁰³ A song from variety impresario Tony Pastor's storehouse relates a poor performer's growing concern that brickbats—in this case, literal rather than metaphorical—would soon be hurled from the audience.²⁰⁴ One former variety performer commented that the genre counted “Rabelaisian humor” and “intimacy” between performers and audience members among its greatest strengths.²⁰⁵

As we have seen, managers of popular performance joined their brethren in the legitimate theatre in a pursuit of a “better behaved” audience. Tony Pastor's efforts along those lines in the 1870s and 1880s, including elimination of alcohol and a great deal of politically provocative material, concretized in popular and critical consciousness by the 1880s. Writing from England sometime late in the decade, a self-described “American Theatre-Goer Abroad,” Mr. Dague, found Plymouth music hall audiences vastly deficient in conduct when compared with their American counterparts. It wasn't simply that the voluble audiences spoke back to performers that so disturbed him; it was the frequency with which they did so. It wasn't the boisterousness of the assemblage that vexed him; it was the behavior's apparent root in alcohol. (Predictably, the innocent abroad assigned much of the blame to the heavily male composition of the audience, hearkening to the civilizing force presumed of female audiences in his homeland.) Finally, Dague, in his chilly indictment of the music hall crowds, wholly endorsed what would soon be termed “polite vaudeville's” recalibration of the traditional mechanism of exchange between American popular entertainment audiences and performers. “[I] am an American accustomed to seeing

²⁰³ Pat Rooney II, “Notes for Life Story,” Pat Rooney II Collection, Harry Ransom Humanities Center, University of Texas, Austin.

²⁰⁴ E.W. Rodgers, “If It Ain't It's A Good Imitation,” Music by A.E. Durandean, Tony Pastor Collection, Harry Ransom Humanities Center, University of Texas, Austin.

²⁰⁵ Frank Caverly, “Variety Has Brought Fame to Many Since Hub Birth,” *Boston American* 06 Aug 1931.

vaudeville audiences give even a bad act a courteous hearing,” he held. “They say we Americans have no manners. Well, perhaps not—outside of a vaudeville theatre.”²⁰⁶

Dague limns vaudeville audiences in too flattering a light, of course.

Audiences in American variety entertainments continued to engage in far more interactive and interruptive behavior than their legitimate brethren, and would do so throughout the life of the various genres. However, the differences he noted between music hall and vaudeville audiences were quite real and would have been far less obvious or true a decade earlier. People did speak less. Folks in the dark—and now they were in the dark—did hold themselves and their compatriots to far different standards than had their concert saloon’s forebears. Alcohol, whose consumption was viewed by most as encouraging rowdyism reminiscent of what one remembered as “the Bowery Theatre in its palmy days,” had been largely pushed out of the variety theatre.²⁰⁷ A vaudeville audience member would have been far less likely to have carried a weapon than one watching the thundering Forrest earlier in the century; he most definitely would not have discharged it during exciting points of the action. (He would also have been far less likely to have been reliably referred to with the increasingly antiquated universal “he.”) As much as scholars of popular entertainment seek to hold fast to a satisfyingly Rabelaisian vision of the audience, one must note the very real shifts in an audience’s concession of its traditional powers under the new politeness.

However, as we shall see, the lessening (and not, as has been implied, erasure) of the audience’s role as interactive agent did not wholly cast it from a productive role in the performance matrix. Indeed, the degree to which managers and ticket-holders

²⁰⁶ Dague, “American Theatre-Goer Abroad, Number 33.” 28 May 1888, Harvard Theatre Collection, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Folder #1.

²⁰⁷ John Carboy, “Our Managers. Antonio Pastor,” Tony Pastor Collection, University of Texas, Austin.

alike conceptualized audience members as a striking amalgam of consumer and adjudicator thrust spectators to the fore in early vaudeville. Though radical exercise (e.g., drunkenly challenging characters to a fight) was truncated and under the censoring authority of the increased respectability of the middle class audience that now mixed with the working class clientele from earlier variety days, vaudeville did maintain several distinct characteristics that allowed it to escape the complete formal closure that was swiftly attenuating audience agency in the legitimate houses. While it was not the often riotous audience of Jacksonian America, neither was it the increasingly docile and submissive assemblage gathered at the feet of the legitimate players.

Most importantly, though vaudeville became partly enfolded in the culture of hierarchical edification that shot through late nineteenth-century America, managers and patrons alike held fast to an aesthetic model in which the ticket-holders continued to instruct the operators as to their desired modes of spectatorship. Heirs of the Bowery's working class interactivity, the popular theatre did not have the luxury of the Chicago Orchestra's Theodore Thomas, who, buttressed by the funds of a few wealthy patrons, decreed that his glum audiences would listen to Wagner's compositions until they learned to like them.²⁰⁸ In the vaudeville house, the audience still held sway. Significantly, this continued valuation of various forms of immediate adjudication occurred in a genre that still drew patrons from the working class even as it increasingly incorporated the coalescing middle class, the future force behind Progressive reforms. Vaudeville houses thus provided nightly performances of collective action that built within the American middle class a belief in its own muscular agency.

²⁰⁸ Theodore Thomas, qtd. in Levine 189.

Furthermore, vaudeville understood such demonstration as legible, complex, and important. Audience members in the realistic theatre were meant to melt into the darkness. Spectators at the philharmonic or grand opera applauded at proper junctures and usually refrained from expressing anything so indecorous as a hiss. Both created scenarios in which pre-figured consumption of culture negated the possibility of engaging the event in a broad variety of ways. In the vaudeville house, however, managers, eyes ever on the pocket books they called patrons, took careful note of even the minutest shifts in the audience's attention, interest and favor. Though operators such as M.J. Keating and Tony Pastor certainly had their own tastes and considered themselves beholden to and invested in the mores and aesthetic of their epoch, surviving records indicate that little would cause them to lay an ace over the judgment of their audiences. Keating, to whom the Albee-Keith chain entrusted its prized Boston house, took far fewer pains than most to shield from his employers a patent subservience to the audience. Consequently, his surviving manager's reports clearly delineate the degree and care with which he maintained the audience as the authoritative presence in the theatre. Unable to depend upon uniform response and tasked with gauging even the smallest shifts in their favor, Keating read audience reaction as the most important performance text in the theatre.

Perhaps it was the largely unfamiliar house, driven into the theatre by a rainy June afternoon in 1903, which caused Keating to so fully unfold his analytic method in a report to the central office. Keating had been forewarned of the weak company supporting Lillian Burkhart in her latest sketch, "A Strenuous Daisy." Braced for a disastrous collision between an incompetent act and an audience that owed him nothing, Keating exhaled deeply as the sketch met with an appreciative response. Indeed, ignorant as to the quality of material that normally graced this stage, the

audience compelled Burkhart to delay her curtain speech for two full minutes while they showered the finish with applause.

Though Keating did not share the rave review handed in by his patrons his lengthy conditioning at their hands led him to seamlessly cede to their verdict. Not the strongest of acts, he agreed, but “the audience seemed satisfied in every way, and I don't see any sense in managers setting up a ‘holler’ when those who paid money have no ‘kick’ coming.” Keating cut roughly a quarter of another popular act’s material from the same bill, justifying the excisions partly through casting the material as obscene, a death-knell in polite vaudeville. Interestingly, however, he still felt compelled to defend tampering with an act that had already earned the audience favor: this audience’s judgment should be taken less seriously because the group was not composed of regular patrons. In a final attempt to reconcile his simultaneous dismissal and embrace of these unexpected spectators he leapt from the usual economy of the manager’s report to fully lay out his managerial aesthetic.

My criticisms, as nearly as possible, are given from the view seemingly taken by the audience. I always try to sink my own identity in the matter, as it is those who support the theatre whom we should strive to please, not our individual tastes. If we can suit the majority of those who pay the money, then we should all feel satisfied.²⁰⁹

Keating’s willingness to subordinate his own view to that of the audience is important on two fronts. First, though ostensibly the authority figure in the theatre, Keating, records make clear, only saw one area, vulgarity and obscenity, as incapable of admitting discussion. The chain’s headquarters made great demands on managers, tasking them with the enforcement of the various prohibitions and expectation that

²⁰⁹ M.J. Keating, Manager’s Report (Boston), 15 Jun 1903, Keith-Albee Collection, University of Iowa, Iowa City.

worked together in the service of polite culture. Keating, however, like most managers, reserved the right to determine the worth of an act to a particular audience on a particular day. The reaction might never be the same again, of course, but the vaudeville manager would be as attentive of the evening audience as he had been to the afternoon crowd. Because of this, each group would be allowed to co-author the entertainment (e.g., delaying the progression of the bill with unexpected applause) they witnessed. To pull again on Freire's banking model, vaudeville audiences insisted that they be allowed to make deposits of culture—individuated for each spectator and collectivized in group response—that affected the performance. Such consideration was neither extended nor effectively obtained within forms of sacred culture, many of which reenacted the same oppressive totality found in the nation's economy. Writing in 1898, Henry Demarest Lloyd, the Progressive champion of women's suffrage and settlement houses, warned that such a loss of "individual, or even co-operative initiative or independence" led to nothing less than "industrial feudalism."²¹⁰ Moments such as occurred between Lillian Burkhart and her rainy afternoon audience actively worked against such acquiescence.

Managers, of course, had their own idiosyncratic, often deeply considered sense of an act's worth. The surviving managers' reports are replete with sharply rendered dissections of nearly every aspect of an act's time before the audience. However, while they usually demonstrated both keen interest and acute critical skills most managers, like Keating, proved loathe to overrule their patrons' own judgment. A year before Keating bowed to the tastes of his rainy-day audience, his compatriot at the Providence Keith house disparaged the well-received illustrated song act of Hollis and Howard. (The illustrations, in particular, were so poor as to "give one the

²¹⁰ Henry Demarest Lloyd, "The Co-operative Movement," *From Populism to Progressivism*, ed. Louis Filler (Huntington, NY: Robert E. Krieger Publishing Company, 1978) 152.

nightmare.”) As the audience gave the duo a good response, however, the manager reluctantly granted he must abandon his own adjudication. “It must,” he relented, “be classed a good act.”²¹¹ Managers just as commonly found themselves pushing an act they considered talented off future bills because the audience deprecated or even savaged the turn. Detailing the demise of Sweatman and Maxwell a couple of months before Burkhart hit town, Keating sighed to Albee, “Personally, I think it is great, but the Supreme Court [the audience] was not in accord with me.”²¹²

“Guying,” or verbally riding the performer during the turn, was the most immediately effective means of collectively controlling either individual acts or particular aspects of their turns. If the brickbats feared by earlier performers had become metaphorical in nature they were no less destructive to an act. Appearing before a New York house in 1903, the male-female trapeze and ring act of Skatinelli and Delilia had apparently hoped to satisfy men in the audience through the time-honored trick of simply displaying the female form, disregarding how poorly it had incorporated Delilia into the turn. The audience, however, would have none of it. Accustomed to women, no matter how beautiful or scantily clad, functioning as more than window dressing, the folks in the front of the house—supposedly, the well-mannered patrons—soon grew cattily disdainful of the woman’s unproductive poses. “The woman does nothing at all but stand around and assist the man,” confirmed manager S. K. Hodgdon. “And while she is very pretty the audience were inclined to guy her a little bit this afternoon on account of the fact that she does not do anything.” Should the act fail to heed the audience’s instruction, the manager warns that “if there

²¹¹ Manager’s Report (Providence), 06 Oct 1902, Keith-Albee Collection, University of Iowa, Iowa City.

²¹² M.J. Keating, Manager’s Report (Boston), 16 Mar 1903, Keith-Albee Collection, University of Iowa, Iowa City.

is any indication of [guying] tonight I will take her off entirely.”²¹³ The bagpiping Clan Johnson Troop fared poorer still in Keith’s Providence house the preceding year. Guyed throughout by the audience, the act finally elicited a managerial recommendation to avoid booking all such acts in Providence.²¹⁴ Acknowledgement and reflexive incorporation of audience opinion became definitional for the most sterling acts. Critic Hartley Davis, analyzing vaudeville monologists, decided most performers flourish in vaudeville only when they “possess marvelous skill in overcoming the hostility of an audience.” The best among them, he declared, does not ignore confrontation but incorporates it, displaying a “mind [that] seems to work automatically in making capital” of the audience’s interjections.”²¹⁵ Butsch agrees, finding that “adept” vaudeville performer had to respond to the “vibrant energy” presented by spectators that remained heirs to a Jacksonian aesthetic.²¹⁶

Undeniably, performers who would make a career of vaudeville quickly learned to acknowledge audience interaction; those would become wildly successful in the form found ways of incorporating spectator contributions, letting audience members change the performance as it developed. After all, audiences gayed, as manager Hodgdon makes clear, in an effort to “instruct” the performers, not simply out of a desire to vent into the darkness. This same need to responsively demand and create change in the context and content of their environment, now largely absent from the legitimate stage and sacred culture offerings, also drove Progressive calls for social reformation. Theodore Roosevelt located this inclination at the heart of the more

²¹³ S. K. Hodgdon, Manager’s Report (New York), 05 Jan 1903, Keith-Albee Collection, University of Iowa, Iowa City.

²¹⁴ Charles Lovenberg, Manager’s Report (Providence), 09 Feb 1903, Keith-Albee Collection, University of Iowa, Iowa City.

²¹⁵ Davis, “In Vaudeville” 239.

²¹⁶ At this point in his analysis, Butsch is contending that vaudevillians often provided the illusion of control to the audience in an effort to “channel” the otherwise dangerous energy. This is a point to which I shall later return. Butsch, *The Making of American Audiences* 60.

“perfect” political institutions sought through Progressive policies. More than anything, he argued, citizens seeking social and economic justice needed to create systems whose managers were “more quickly and sensitively responsive to the people whose servants they are.”²¹⁷ Indeed, this assertion of counter-will, be it during a vaudeville performance or on the floor of an open shop, offered Progressive era Americans, in the words of early-twentieth century historian Walter Weyl, “the possibility of [an] alternative social organization.” By frustrating this interrogatory impulse of such “insurgent Americans,” argues Weyl, could the Golden Age magnates “live many years in uncontested rule of the American nation.”²¹⁸

A lack of direct interaction does disqualify social and cultural forms from the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century from possessing political and social efficacy. Certainly, the social problem play, and earlier, the local color play, allowed the legitimate stage to provide a depth of analysis and range of consideration for its audience that was often difficult in the quicker-paced, multi-act vaudeville house. As is evidenced by the Progressive era’s many lecture events—most notably, Chautauqua—and valorization of frequently rote education, Progressives found great merit in more passive absorption, especially as such consumption did not preclude later modifying one’s views prior to implementation of social programs. Vernon L. Parrington, a frank partisan of the Progressives whose era he shared and analyzed, argues that the fuller discussion of such fare, such as might be gained in the legitimate theatre, was important in combating “the flabby optimism of the Gilded Age.”²¹⁹ Social problem plays, like the early, imperfect Progressive scholarship Parrington

²¹⁷ Theodore Roosevelt, *The New Nationalism* (New York: Prentice Hall, 1961) 37.

²¹⁸ Weyl uses the latter phrase in reference to the plutocracy’s canny “self-directed curbing of its own worst impulses.” Walter Weyl, *The New Democracy: An Essay on Certain Political and Economic Tendencies in the United States* (New York: MacMillan, 1913) 155.

²¹⁹ Vernon J. Parrington, “The Progressive Era: A Liberal Renaissance,” *Progressive Era: Liberal Renaissance of Liberal Failure?*, ed. Arthur Mann (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1963) 9.

excuses, “gathered” reformatory knowledge and examples and set them onto “the scale of public opinion.”²²⁰ This ownership allowed the era’s legitimate audiences a rich opportunity for conjecture, discussion following the performance, and incorporation of their digestion into social reforms in the life-world. Yet all of these modalities of “performance” (and in this I include monologic classroom instruction) did not provide a laboratory for direct action during the event of consumption. The new aesthetic of voyeurism in the realistic theatre also denied the audience members any ability to model, experience, and practice the odd admixture of individual and collective action during the event itself that would be necessary in finally addressing inequality once they left the theatre. Only when a citizen actually founds a settlement house, regulates the stock market, overthrows a political machine, or passes a suffrage bill through a state legislature could the era’s “liberalism” be said to have thrown “itself into the work of cleaning the Augean stables” of corruption and oppression.²²¹ Vaudeville, however, with its greater degree of spectatorial efficacy during the performance event, often encouraged the producers of culture (i.e., the vaudevillians) to embrace Roosevelt’s “sensitive responsiveness” while wrestling with Butsch’s “vibrant energy” emanating from the house. In so doing, it provided a clear venue in which the era’s audiences could experiment with and demonstrate effective agency.

Because vaudevillians and spectators understood a high degree of dialogic reciprocity as foundational to their relationship, even silence took on an active role in the vaudeville house. While thunderous applause and the call for the hook represent the far reaches of the response spectrum, managers, vaudevillians, and audience members spent most of their time operating in the vast nether region between these poles. In this field of uncertainty, performers and those who had engaged them

²²⁰ Parrington 10.

²²¹ Parrington 12.

attempted acts of divination rivaling those of the many mentalists traveling the circuit. Silence proved the most flummoxing, for obvious reasons, though managers usually assumed that a completely mute audience was inherently hostile in nature.²²² Keating took great pains to praise a “real Coon” act—blackened-up African Americans performers, he found, seemed to hold up their energy for a strong finish better than their white counterparts—but concluded its effort was for naught. Confronted with one of the “dare-you-to-make-me-applaud sort of assemblages,” the entire show failed, sinking the otherwise strong act with it.²²³ Conway and McFarland, a garishly “ethnic” Irish dialect conversation and singing duo, met with a similar crowd in the same theatre a few months earlier. (Whether or not they were “real Irish” goes unreported.) This time, however, the quiescence represented deeper movement for Keating. “I think I can see evidences, the work of Irish organisms against these sorts of turns,” he confided to Albee. “And while [audience members] do not show any outward signs of disapproval, the silence with which [the performers] are greeted indicate that there is some reason for it.”²²⁴

Both turns addressed by Keating were comic acts that could have been fairly and initially judged simply by the volume and frequency of laughter. Yet Keating, a phenomenally acute watchman over his charge, challenges a system in which all silences agglomerate under the single reference of lack by acknowledging a greater complexity of audience response in vaudeville. The two silences instead represent radically different statements within a rich, culturally cognizant vocabulary of

²²² This assumption did not hold true during acts displaying high culture. During these performances managers appreciated the “respect” lent to the offerings, a silence that reflected back upon the audience as a marker of Yvette Guibert’s educational quality. Few performers address silence in their reminiscences, investing what little energy they expend in parsing negative reactions to discussions of the more florid demonstrations they encountered.

²²³ Manager’s Report (New York), 31 Aug 1903, Keith-Albee Collection, University of Iowa, Iowa City.

²²⁴ M.J. Keating, Manager’s Report (Boston), 27 Apr 1903, Keith-Albee Collection, University of Iowa, Iowa City.

productive response. The first he reads as an unmotivated action by a “tough house.” The few African-Americans in the audience and their remove from the action—most likely in the second gallery—negated consideration of political intent from Keating’s analysis. In the second scenario, however, ominous “Irish organisms” have been militating against the triumph of comedians they viewed as derogatory.²²⁵ This is not to say that a silent audience carried no meaning in the legitimate houses of the day. It surely did. However, as we have seen, the vaudeville aesthetic so depended on an interactive and demonstrative audience, one engaged with the performer in the actual construction of the cultural object, that the same inaction resonated with greater force.²²⁶ Only when performance licenses interaction as a force capable of sculpting the cultural object during its pre-archived state of active transmission could an obverse state of silence create what Peggy Phelan locates as important forces of spectatorial control.²²⁷

Audience members often carried judicial presumptions out of the performance by seeking out theatre managers to comment on performances. In 1903, Boston’s Keating gleefully informed the central office, “Even ‘Crusty Bill,’ who has been our bugaboo on Mondays right along, came to me and volunteered the opinion that for

²²⁵ Keating stood a good chance of being right on both assumptions, if not his final judgments. African Americans occupied a portion of Boston vaudeville houses radically disproportionate with the number of both African American and blacked-up white performers. They would therefore have been far less able to plunge the entire audience into the defiant stupor reported by Keating. Irish populations, on the other hand, had been well represented in both Boston and her variety entertainment houses since before the birth of the Know-Nothings in the 1850s. Warning Albee about an offensive (and not “real”) Jewish duo making the rounds in between the previously mentioned Coon and Irish acts, Keating justifies his mounting concerns by referencing past action by Boston’s Irish community. The children of Erin apparently had raised quite a “kick . . . against this kind of burlesque of their nationality.” M.J. Keating, Manager’s Report (Boston), 13 Jul 1903, Keith-Albee Collection, University of Iowa, Iowa City.

²²⁶ In this one also discovers a curious challenge to *qui tacet consentit*, the legal principle holding that silence invariably implies consent; vaudeville audience activated silence as a means of indictment. So powerful was the sense of audience agency within the vaudeville house that even this seeming withdrawal from the field of combat was understood to be an assertion of power; in a medium that judged worth by favor, silence was sometimes the loudest statement of all.

²²⁷ Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (New York: Routledge, 1993) 163.

nine years he had been a weekly patron of the house, this was the best show we had ever given." Keating offered Bill's relish in the same report that applauds the success of Winchell Smith and Company, a sketch group that featured two characters in a "semi-intoxicated state." A Detroit house had complained the same week of a sketch featuring intoxication, but Keating's raves sought to forestall an injunction against a hit act. "I am afraid we will have some criticism of Winchell Smith's act," he admitted, "but the vast majority like it."²²⁸ The manager then pushed for the group to receive further bookings. In the same report, then, Keating prizes first the individual's opinion (in the person of Crusty Bill) and that of the bulk of the audience (when begging for a reprieve for the Winchell Trio). Managers understood audience agency to function on both levels: mass action, most meaningfully demonstrated in continued patronage, remained of endless interest; individual action, be it a catcall or an angry letter, particularized and corporeally situated the concept of "favor" within a single person. Such legible demonstrations of favor and interest enabled managers to better craft bills, shape turns, and recommend acts for continued employment. More importantly, continued managerial interest in and monitoring of audience reactions validated and perpetuated a high degree of effective agency on the part of the spectators, even as such instrumentality atrophied in the legitimate houses.

Attentive to these vagaries of their profession, performers sometimes overplayed their hand in attempting to earn the audience's heart. The turn of the century found the smallest of the Aharn Brothers, an exceedingly slow acrobat troupe, forced to "pose a great deal and spring the 'please applaud' smile on the audience frequently" in the hopes of winning his troupe mates time to hit their marks.²²⁹

²²⁸ M.J. Keating, Manager's Report (Boston), 27 Apr 1903, Keith-Albee Collection, University of Iowa, Iowa City.

²²⁹ H.A. Daniels, Manager's Report (Philadelphia), 16 Feb 1903, Keith-Albee Collection, University of Iowa, Iowa City.

Vaudeville audiences, flush with a sense of power denied them in the theatres playing James Herne and Clyde Fitch, often appreciated this acknowledgement of their agency. S.K. Hodgson, manager of Keith's New York house, confirmed that some teetering turns played on this delight in making great use of the "'give-us-your-kind-applause' material, which is always bound to go."²³⁰ Woe to the performers who gave the impression they deserved, rather than desired, countenance from their collaborators across the footlights. Though a native Bostonian, the blackface comedian James Francis Dooley found himself in increasingly hot waters as his act wore on in a visit to his hometown. Dooley's manner, determined the manager, informed the audience that he considered himself an expert performer independent of and preceding their applause. Such exclusion of the audience from the evaluative process "militates somewhat against his success," the manager found.²³¹ Proper determination of worth in the vaudeville house, then, was understood by the audience as both dialogic and existing in the real-time of the performance. Acts that attempted to exclude the audience from the process did so at peril to their continued employment.²³²

²³⁰ S. K. Hodgson, Manager's Report (New York), 16 Feb 1903, Keith-Albee Collection, University of Iowa, Iowa City.

²³¹ M.J. Keating, Manager's Report (Boston), 27 Apr 1903, Keith-Albee Collection, University of Iowa, Iowa City.

²³² Conversely, a type of prefigured response became increasingly appropriate in the legitimate theatre. Minnie Maddern Fiske's "greatness," for example was presumed to be a manifest force. Should a local audience fail to divine it, to arrive at the proper and just adjudication of her worth, it, like Theodore Thomas's Wagner-phobic philharmonic crowds, bore the burden of failure. Her value seemingly independent of any gauging by the audience, Fiske carried with her an aura of success that invited the audience to appreciate while precluding it from altering. In effect, her lack of need to immediately please excluded the legitimate audience from any real-time, site-specific and collaborative creation of worth. Such moments of "success" in the performance arena thus passed into existence as artifacts of past performances; a career became safely remapped as a registry of shadow events, each singly referencing an infinitely recessive and immutable point of original success. Excluded from a position of judgment such audiences instead found themselves in the dock. Such an inversion of the traditional reciprocity between spectator and performer forced the normally gamic act of performance into an enfeebled state of sterile, unidirectional transmission. Though certain tendencies came to bear upon the success of an act or the bill (e.g., the popularity of Irish comedians in Detroit) the "need to please" that consumed the vaudeville aesthetic maintained the two parties in a far more reciprocal relationship than would become common in the legitimate theatre.

Vaudevillians often sought an even fuller convergence with their audience through shattering the chief distinction between the two parties: who watched whom perform. As the nineteenth century progressed, technical innovations such as gas (and then electrical) lighting had conspired with shifts in decorum to plunge an increasingly inert audience into darkness. Not only did the audience find itself deprived of the ancient tradition of watching itself throughout the performance—for what else were boxes intended? —but performers sacrificed a communal space, one in which more mutual illumination and dialogic play encouraged less exacting distinctions between object and subject. In an enactment of the agency and staging of metasystemic critique crucial to succeeding Progressive reforms, however, many vaudevillians violated these new boundaries in creating acts revolving around variable audience participation and performer reaction. Just as members of Progressive America actively sought systemic reform through new governmental agencies, regulations promoting workplace safety, and wider suffrage, the vaudeville audience's insistence that it be allowed to remain as co-author of the performance event reflects what Robert Wiebe finds the American tendency to “translate [the outside world's] events into the language of local power.”²³³ Wary of an urban setting that increasingly seemed “so vast, so impersonal, seemingly without beginning or end,” the late-nineteenth century urbanite forced events within the vaudeville house to submit to not just their disciplining gaze but their active participation.²³⁴

Some routines acknowledged this hunger within the audience by employing ticket-holders as active participants, allowing for a fuller sharing of authority and authorship between stage and house. Pelot, a “rube kid juggler” performing in 1902, the year after Progressive Theodore Roosevelt assumed the presidency, exacted

²³³ Wiebe 164..

²³⁴ Wiebe 165.

revenge for all the Pat Rooneys of the world: he showered the audience with apples. The audience members, in turn, would hurl them back onto stage as the youth ran about catching them on a fork held in his mouth. In a confluence of faint praise that would have done Dorothy Parker proud, the reports of two different managers have the juggler's skill running the gamut from "ordinary" to "nothing out of the ordinary," yet he managed to qualify as a "big hit" by staging the audience during the turn; members had both thrown apples to and at the otherwise marginal performer.²³⁵

Butsch errs in finding that routines such as these provided only the illusion of audience power within a "participation [that] was prompted and managed by the performers."²³⁶ Instead, these routines moved popular performance past antebellum excess that all too often created an event ruled through rowdyism to one benefiting from more equal, less threatening stations of mutual address. In one sense, the new rules of decorum in the vaudeville house worked to the benefit of this conversation. Though the Jacksonian theatre so celebrated for its free-wheeling excess provides theatre history with examples of more fiery audience interactivity, one must note that the restive crowd often acted as a mob in the early to mid-nineteenth century. Threats of real violence against the vastly out-numbered performers not only interfered with a thorough hearing of offering, they encouraged a hall too frequently ruled by demagogocracy. Though it never sought a benumbed quiescence, corporate vaudeville's attempt to ensure convivial consumption through enforcement of the

²³⁵ Plagued by countless iterations of even the most minor successes, vaudeville saw someone lift Pelot's signature bit a few weeks later. The distinguishing innovation: turnips. Later, of course, Pelot lifted the turnip bit to be *his* signature move. S. K. Hodgon, Manager's Report (New York), 17 Nov 1902, Keith-Albee Collection, University of Iowa, Iowa City. Ben Hurtig, Manager's Report (New York), 08 Dec 1902, Keith-Albee Collection, University of Iowa, Iowa City. Edward Renton, *The Vaudeville Theatre: Building, Operation, Management* (New York: Gotham Press, 1918) 257.

²³⁶ Butsch speaks here of a shift in the "conversation across the footlights" in the popular theatre's working class plays of the 1840s. Butsch, *The Making of American Audiences* 60.

polite decorum increasingly associated with the middle-class thus provided calmer environs in which interaction between spectator and performer could occur.

By the late 1880s, performers in big-time vaudeville found that the days of being willfully pelted with peanuts by newsboys in the gallery generally (and blessedly) lay behind them. The process by which the audience entered into the “adopting or lynching” of an act, to use Albee’s phrase, partly because it *was* less invasive than in days past, did not explode in the spasmodic frenzy of an inflamed, drunken, all-male audience.²³⁷ Instead, performers and audience members could feel one another out carefully, the former party subtly adjusting the act (during and after a performance) to ensure favor and contracts, the latter moderating interaction out of the need to fulfill expectations of polite discourse. If it was a milquetoast version of the earlier variety halls, it was also nevertheless more amenable to the communal production of culture.²³⁸

The mutuality may be established by the surviving managers’ reports, the bulk of which make clear that the performer’s intentions were sometimes successful, sometimes trumped by the partners she inherited with the raise of each performance’s curtain. Many attempts at working in developing concert with audience members by no means proceeded along the smooth tracks of a pre-figured call-and-response. This was not only due to a resistant audience, of course, but sometimes the inevitable result

²³⁷ Edward F. Albee qtd. in Harvey Alexander Higgins, Jr. “Breaking Into Vaudeville,” *Shadowland* (Oct. 1919) 42.

²³⁸ I would also argue that the new ground upon which the audience and performers met after corporate vaudeville’s institutionalized reforms proved fertile for a greater breadth of acts than had previously played in variety performance. Though several factors helped bring about the staggering breadth of content, form, and presentation at vaudeville’s apogee in the 1910s (e.g., more taste cultures represented, a massive performer base, national circuits) it is clear that many types of acts flourished in the less rowdy climes of polite vaudeville. Some of these (e.g., high culture posing acts) were hot-house flowers that would have withered under the unremitting glare of the sovereign Jacksonian audiences. Others used the fuller hearing on the part of the audience to complete their failure (rather than flee the stage), re-tool the act in small-time based on this feedback, and then work their way back into the better paying circuits and houses. Albee archly termed this final state, somewhat between his poles of “adopting and lynching,” as the audience having elected for “foster mother-hood.” Edward F. Albee qtd. in Higgins 42.

of “performers” who had only recently joined the act. Such routines could be remarkably rough hewn, especially when, as with Georgia Evans popular but apparently somewhat atonal 1903 audience sing-along, the fellow performers had only been taught their parts a few moments earlier.²³⁹ Tellingly, managers did not consider this spontaneously “rewritten” act a failure so long as the final product refrained from suggestiveness and obscenity and pleased the audience.

Other acts completed the communion of audience member with performer by welcoming spectators to the stage proper, often as jurists empowered to ground a fantastic premise in authenticity. Samuel Paul, the aptly named “Human Target,” brought a group of audience members up to examine and mark a musket ball. The group then withdrew to the edge of a wing while one of their fellows fired the missile at Paul, who, upon catching the ball in his teeth, returned it to the group for validation.²⁴⁰ Houdini’s act once enlisted a “committee” from the audience to inspect all the equipment used by the “master mind of the self-liberator.”²⁴¹ This voluntary surrender over the boundary distinctions of what Joanne Klein frames as the artist’s “horizon of artistic tyranny” enabled a diaphragmatic pliancy to the vaudeville stage, creating an aperture capable of compassing myriad forms and degrees of shared agency.²⁴² Moreover, though turns extensively rehearsed for a wide array of possible audience actions, the real-time nature of performance, particularly one as intent as vaudeville on tailoring to each individual audience, invariably involved both performer and spect-*actor* in wholly original events. Paul, the aforementioned

²³⁹ H.A. Daniels, Manager’s Report (Philadelphia), 23 Mar 1903, Keith-Albee Collection, University of Iowa, Iowa City.

²⁴⁰ Samuel O. Paul, The United Vaudeville Artists, Inc. Protected Files, University of Southern California, Los Angeles: File #2234.

²⁴¹ “B.F. Keith’s—Houdini,” *Washington Post* 10 Jan. 1922.

²⁴² Joanne Klein, “Looking at Looking (at Looking): Experiments in the Interrogation of Spectating,” *Audience Participation: Essays on Inclusion in Performance*, ed. Susan Kattwinkel. (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003) 111.

“Human Target,” confided the previous master of the masked musket ball catch, Ching Ling Foo (a.k.a., William Robinson), ceased performing the feat after being shot dead by an audience member.²⁴³

Efforts by vaudevillians such as the late lamented Mr. Foo *né* Robinson, however, helped an audience increasingly composed of middle class spectators adopt and maintain a stance of intrusive rejoinder with roots in the aggressive Jacksonian audience dynamic, an important bolt in the quiver of those Progressives who sought to reverse “the shocking leniency of judging conspicuous persons who have thriven by anti-social practices.”²⁴⁴ Late for her first performance in big-time vaudeville in 1909, Sophie Tucker forgot to show the musical breaks of her final number to the orchestra leader. At the first break, rather than playing the reprise, the orchestras simply ground into silence, leaving Tucker to frantically whistle the tune for the musicians. Tucker intended “just to show the orchestra what I meant . . . thinking they would catch on for the balance.” They did not. Instead, the sympathetic audience, having been told this was Tucker’s tryout performance, picked up the strain of the tune and whistled the incipient “red-hot mama” through the break until the orchestra re-entered. At the end of the turn, the manager stepped onto stage and offered the fate of Tucker’s contract up to the audience; they retained her.²⁴⁵ Building from Progressive essayist Walter Weyl’s phraseology concerning inequity under consolidated capital, in this single incident the “ultimate” audience member joined in co-mediated production with the “penultimate” performer and “ante-penultimate” theatre manager.

Moreover, such managers unwittingly aided efforts to place themselves in a triangulated contestation over the authority of the house by publicizing their role in

²⁴³ Paul I.

²⁴⁴ Edward Alsworth Ross, *Sin and Society: An Analysis of Latter-day Iniquity* (New York: Houghton, Mifflin, 1907) 46.

²⁴⁵ Sophie Tucker with Dorothy Giles, *Some of These Days* (New York: Doubleday, 1945) 84-86.

maintaining both decorum and quality within the confines of the theatre. Most vaudeville managers understood their duties as censor of and gate-keeper to the stage as being marvelously marketable in their own right. The interviews they frequently granted to local papers (most of which depended, in some degree, on the manager's advertising dollars) outlined their wearying attention to the commonweal. In turn, newspaper features, sold on the narrative of vaudeville as a variety washed clean through the efforts of the censorious manager, came to attribute much of vaudeville's newfound respectability to this figure. Finding a "scene of beauty" capable of entertaining "the best class of theatre-goers," one Memphis reviewer ascribed its place as "part of the community" to the man who signed the checks and disciplined audience and performer alike. Only the manager's labors, the reviewer concluded, had made the theatre "worthy of the patronage it now receives."²⁴⁶ A second Memphian agreed, noting in particular the manager's insistence on pre-screening all acts before they reached the public eye.²⁴⁷

National magnates such as Albee had laid the groundwork for this image by weaving their self-congratulatory tales of admonishing "improper" audiences and performers alike into the grand narrative of vaudeville's "salvation" from variety. Essentially, then, the managers of individual theatres localized, individuated, and geographically situated the very disciplining power that had first licensed vaudeville attendance by women and the larger middle class. In so doing, audiences and performers alike, formerly conditioned to "attributing omnipotence to abstractions" such as the regional or national chain, found in the neighborhood manager a ready target for their struggles over the nature and reach of an authority that appeared at

²⁴⁶ Bernard Cohn, "Amusements. Orpheum.", Pat Rooney II Collection, Harry Ransom Center for the Humanities, University of Texas, Austin, Texas.

²⁴⁷ Hugh G. Huhn, newspaper review, Pat Rooney II Collection, Harry Ransom Center for the Humanities, University of Texas, Austin, Texas.

odds with their own desires.²⁴⁸ The audience desired the right to serve as “the Supreme Court,” and thus sought the ability to judge material directly from the performer. In this, audience members, having sacrificed direct access in the Faustian bargain made under the mantle of respectability, found themselves constantly frustrated by the manager. Similarly, the performer lived under constant threat of managerial interference, subject to censorship and fearful of firing.

Yet both spectator and performer gained an advantage once the evening had begun its live presentation. Tucker’s manager, in walking out on stage, foregrounded his authority in an unusually patent fashion. The role of the manager was usually understood to be behind the scenes or expressed through the papers. Live performance thus granted auditor and performer alike an opportunity to collude in a critique of authority under the very eyes of the sometimes seething offstage manager. “How the inspired efforts of the eminent Messrs. Clark and McCullough ever circumvented Mr. E.F. Albee’s well-known and widely exploited aversion to the color that’s known as ‘blue,’” decided one bemused reviewer, “is a problem fraught with vast possibilities for fun.” In the end, the critic merrily decided, the material that had swept toward him past the likely seething manager had “warped” his taste.²⁴⁹ The vaudeville house, the nation’s chief entertainment venue for over forty years, thus stood as a ring in which, as Wiebe notes, that “urge to fight again and again [that] infected ever increasing numbers, particularly those the new middle class” could land a meaningful punch.²⁵⁰ Additionally, allowing the manger to assume a simultaneously solicitous and authoritative position, this vaudeville playhouse incorporated the emblem of Weyl’s “American plutocracy” into collective action, a model that was to prove far more effective in achieving Progressive reforms than those fired by socialist

²⁴⁸ Wiebe 164.

²⁴⁹ Bland Johaneson, “New York Theatre,” July 1924.

²⁵⁰ Wiebe 165.

jeremiads.²⁵¹ The success rate of an interactive audience was always high, if only because their interactivity itself battled against the decorum of “polite” entertainment.

As in the period’s formal reform movements, however, the cry for collective redress of social and economic ills ironically excluded the majority of the population from its ideation. In vaudeville, as elsewhere, women and African Americans, in particular, found their ability to exercise counter-hegemonic agency circumscribed by the social, cultural, and economic inequities embedded within patently racially oppressive and phallogentric (sometimes misogynistic) systems of spectatorship. Quite often, managers infantilized female audience members as not merely adjuncts but near equals of address with their children (who, it was assumed, would never attend without a mother’s sanctifying, nurturing presence; no ballgame was the popular theatre). Rarely did managers find such obviously child-oriented acts as trotting ponies or “Jack and the Beanstalk” puppet shows to be fare for children alone. Instead, surviving managers’ reports, littered with admirations such as “a great drawing card for ladies and children,” invariably consider the two groups as coterminous parties.²⁵² I have found only a handful of records reporting on live acts that mention children as an audience distinct from women. When female spectators were singled out for special attention by the ever-watchful managers it was usually only to note pretty gowns in a certain piece were “sure to please the ladies.” Though, as I later argue, women exercised often remarkable (and to some, frequently

²⁵¹ Concerned with the difficulty of organizing the working class during the ongoing “industrial battles,” Weyl posits an unjust lessening of power in the progression from “ante-penultimate manufacturer” to “penultimate shopkeeper” to “ultimate consumer.” Though one might certainly place the vaudevillian, as producer of the cultural object of the individual act, in the role of manufacturer in this schema, I believe this confounds Weyl’s insistence that a hierarchy of economic determination assigns relative power. In vaudeville, managers, though in competition with one another for the biggest headliners, maintained economic control over vaudevillians by controlling access to theatre through bookings. Walter Weyl, *The New Democracy* (New York: Macmillan, 1913) 252.

²⁵² Alison Kibler persuasively argues that this lodging of a child’s innocence and naiveté within a woman’s body colludes to introduce the female spectator into vaudeville as a doubly censorious figure. Alison Kibler, *Rank Ladies: Gender and Cultural Hierarchy in American Vaudeville* (Chapel Hill, NC: UNC UP, 1999) 46-47.

horrifying) powers of critique having once mounted the stage, many men, as evidenced by the gown comments, idealized the female spectator as a force of placid and simple (if convivial) consumption. One bemused 1899 reviewer, for example, observing an Italian woman listening to a song in her native tongue, could not imagine her capable of fully digesting the often complex offerings of the vaudeville stage.²⁵³

Plainly the woman does not understand the double-meaning of a pretty, young songstress who in decidedly candid Neapolitan verse is recounting a very worldly experience. But, taking it all at its face value, she and the children laugh and applaud and get more enjoyment out of it than the knowing ones.²⁵⁴

As well, extant reports, criticism, memoirs, and even informal anecdotes offer little evidence that women within the audience interacted with performers in direct advocacy of causes (e.g., suffrage, the right to divorce) that would distinguish women's struggles in the United States from the general Progressive reforms.²⁵⁵ Some vaudevillians even went out of their way to instruct the female spectators in the very quietistic demeanor targeted by the keenest of Progressives as an unwitting servant of the ruling class. Marion Bent, a "dainty" song and dance performer and the wife of star Pat Rooney II, frequently preceded her entrance to towns along the circuit with interviews in local papers. (As many local vaudeville reviewers were on the publicity payroll of local theatres, this required no great effort.) Bent usually based her public eagerness to reach each locale on its hospitableness for women, lauding first Winnipeg's salutary effect on one's complexion and then Denver's suitability for her mother's rest home. At one stop she also agreed to model various smiles for one

²⁵³ Davis, "In Vaudeville" 234.

²⁵⁴ The reviewer also takes great pains to relate that the woman attended with six children, marrying an assumed fecundity to a supposed simplicity. "Night Life in the Bend", 1899, Harvard Theatre Collection, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts: 4.

²⁵⁵ Many Progressive writers only found themselves able to write about women by once again invoking children and submitting the arguments as discussions of poverty, not gender.

newspaper's educative photo-essay on how women should smile "genuinely." As Bent's likenesses hover over each set of instructions the author warns female readers that others "can tell to a dot" about a woman's true temperament by catching her in an involuntary reaction, such as might be experienced in the theatre. Women should avoid expressions of "cynicism"—a important mode in Progressive thought—and train themselves to allow the exteriority of a forced smile to infuse their inner character with what, in the face of the actual social ills often provoking other expressions, appears to be an almost imbecilic quietude.²⁵⁶ (Following such efforts to steady possibly untoward expression by female vaudeville spectators within the vaudeville house, Bent was complimented by one male reviewer as "dancing as well as a woman half her size."²⁵⁷) Though one 1905 vaudeville champion praised women and children (together again) as "the backbone of the success of vaudeville," what we know about their assumed agency relative to their male counterparts suggests that male management often appreciated the female spectator for her ability to fill seats, lend respectability, and steward children.

White women were at least able to sit in the prized orchestra seats. African Americans were usually restricted to the second gallery, with racial distinctions overriding the usual economic hierarchy present in stratified ticket pricing. Almost everything militated against an overtly productive presence for African American spectators. Although most theatres sold them tickets, African Americans were almost universally segregated at vast remove from their white counterparts, making it impossible, even if the ethos of the hall had allowed, for them to engage the performer through direct or indirect fashion. When managers of the 1920s, responding to a shift

²⁵⁶ "Fads and Fancies in Woman's Realm: Diary of Debutante Shows Sacrifice to Society; Feminine Foibles Analyzed by Professor Munsterburg; How, by Their Magic Smiles, Women Stand Revealed." *The Denver Sunday News* 21 Jan. 1912.

²⁵⁷ Ralph E. Renuad, "Pat Rooney Does the Name Proud," *San Francisco Chronicle* 20 Nov. 1911.

in aesthetic brought about by cinema's increased presence, began asking performers to tone down direct address and the targeting of specific audience members, they never considered the possibility that such interaction would have reached spectators of color, cast beyond even the vexingly churlish newsboys in the first gallery. Every critical and managerial reference to the gallery reads as a treatise on class, not race. For most whites in the vaudeville house, discussions of the "gall'ry gods"—the strongest lingering influence from Jacksonian buoyancy—ended with poorer whites in the first gallery and then ascended into the gilded ceiling.

Nor did the power of the pocketbook enable African American theatergoers to alter the arrangement. In 1903, one Philadelphia manager discovered that a particular week's bill, unusually stocked with acts of color, drew such a large number of African Americans to the theatre that the gallery filled, forcing him "to sell front seats to coons, which drives away the regular patrons." Warning the central office that such acts "draw an element that we do not want to cater to," the manager requests that the chain book fewer acts of color in the future. Even here, however, the epoch's reform spirit intruded into the vaudeville playhouse. Causes behind the derailment of the usually smooth-running segregation of the house, the manager confides, included "lawsuits on our hands and 'niggers' insisting on boxes and front orchestra seats...."²⁵⁸ Edward Renton echoes this recognition of advancing cultural forces in his 1918 treatise on operating a vaudeville playhouse. "It is well to remember," he counsels would-be vaudeville magnates, "that in some cities the better classes of the negroes have declined to patronize a 'second balcony' reserved for them exclusively." Renton's suggestion: eliminate the second balcony to erase the stigma associated with

²⁵⁸ H.A. Daniels, Manager's Report (Philadelphia), 21 Sep. 1903, Keith-Albee Collection, University of Iowa, Iowa City.

it, then divide the first balcony by front/rear, build a separate ticket windows for African American patrons, and resegregate.²⁵⁹

The ability to exercise agency within the vaudeville playhouse, though greater than in its legitimate counterpart, was therefore naturally circumscribed by parallel cultural forces. As Renton's advice and the managers' report suggest, vaudeville also too readily abetted such inequity in both formal and informal manners. Yet diversity within the vaudeville audience remained far greater than in most other forms of live entertainment for several reasons. Unlike burlesque, its popular contemporary, vaudeville managed to shed a reputation as a place beyond the pale for respectable women; the incorporation of women into the audience proved definitional for the rise of vaudeville from variety. The cause toward greater gender diversity was later aided by many vaudeville houses converting to "continuous vaude," a performance schedule in which a show repeated throughout the day allowed women with children to insert a matinee into their schedule. (F.F. Proctor, the "Dean of Vaudeville," memorably shilled for his Twenty-Third Street Music House with the slogan, "After Breakfast go to Proctor's, after Proctor's go to bed."²⁶⁰) As well, if white-owned and operated vaudeville houses wrestled with their "Negro question" in unsatisfying fashion, they wrestled at all because African Americans attended in great enough number to often frustrate attempts at cordoning them off into separate seating.

Most important, while Progressivism struggled with an elitist root to its own egalitarianism—as times, it seems nearly every Progressive *literato*, bent on serving the masses, had attended Harvard or Yale—vaudeville audiences defy final placement within a given economic class, level of cultural sophistication, or ethnic group. (This remains true even when excluding, as does this study by necessity, African American

²⁵⁹ Renton 9.

²⁶⁰ As qtd. in Robert Snyder, *The Voice of the City* (New York: Oxford UP, 1989) 85.

and non-English houses from consideration). Vaudeville was, at its root, a national phenomenon presented in and affected by the differing key of each theatre's surrounding neighborhood. Business districts gave birth to houses priding themselves on the Arrow collared respectability of the Keith-Albee chain. Houses featuring material with more frank working class affiliation grew up around ethnic neighborhoods. Many large theatres, needful of filling seats several times each day, assembled bills of wildly dissimilar turns in the hopes of pleasing each audience member with a few different acts. Audiences that could not afford the legitimate theatre found vaudeville's lower prices and plenitude of curtain times (no small consideration for those working second and third shifts at a factory) a godsend. Finally, even when audiences segregated themselves between different theatres based on ticket prices, proximity to streetcar lines, etc., the acts themselves often migrated between the varying types of houses, leading to an endlessly multi-voiced strain within the genre's discourse. "The cultural dialogue that distinguished vaudeville," notes Robert Snyder, "was the sum of many conversations...."²⁶¹

The richness and breadth of vaudeville's conversations benefited from and greatly abetted Progressivism's drive to push its citizens into a reflexive state of currency between their lives and their interests. Vaudeville's engrossment with change and freshness transcended either a simple formal demand for variegation or the need for performers to repackage themselves. Indeed, vaudeville's emphasis on novelty, topicality, and change is best understood as part of the general cultural shift toward currency occurring in late nineteenth-century America. Richard Hofstadter, identifying the fullest flowering of this thirst for information in muckraking journalism, suggests a wide scope for the period's journalistic inquiry, finding processes of currency and exposure integral to Progressivism's many points of critical

²⁶¹ Snyder 84.

engagement. “It is hardly an exaggeration,” Hofstadter explains, “to say that the progressive mind was characteristically a journalistic mind....”²⁶² His construction of vaudeville’s period—which, like Populism and Progressivism, spanned from the 1880s through the 1920s—as an info-centric epoch aids in unfolding vaudeville’s telling interest in topical engagement. The period’s journalism, like its most popular entertainment, increasingly distinguished itself from a more folkloric narrative style through its necessary obsession with the most recent, the most “up-to-date,” the smallest changes in current events that would justify (and sell) five daily editions or distinguish the Herald from the Intelligencer. The astounding success of these “verbal and graphic equivalents” of the “new cultural bazaars,” holds William R. Taylor, rose directly from the consumer being provided an opportunity to read not simply a newspaper but an environment, one whose changes were reflected in typeface from edition to edition.²⁶³

Unlike the American characters scrutinized by Constance Rourke, which sought to ground a young country with the bedrock of shared and unwavering archetypes, the objects of a journalistic view gained in importance and interest as they changed, as they became, in the words of the marquee motto on the Arch Street Vaudeville Theatre, “entirely new, original and novel.”²⁶⁴ Those within vaudeville noticed the increasing valuation. Playwright Edward Harrigan, comic singer and veteran of variety halls, held that the spirit of late nineteenth-century popular performance created a “reflex of life” responsive to the “new conditions” of modern

²⁶² Hofstadter 186.

²⁶³ William R. Taylor, *In Pursuit of Gotham: Culture and Commerce in New York*. (New York, Oxford UP, 1992) 70.

²⁶⁴ Program, “Gus Hill’s World of Novelties and Greatest All-Feature Show,” Arch Street Theatre, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library, New York City: File#: MWEZ + n.c. 14, 340.

America.²⁶⁵ One critic marveled at vaudeville's focus a handful of weeks into a century that would obsess over newness and its concomitant disposability.

One thing which impresses me more than any other with the present day vaudeville shows is the constant call for change. In the old days the public never got tired of hearing the old songs, and, in fact, repeatedly called upon the performer, if he had added to his repertoire to hark back and sing for them. . . . I remember one night at Buffalo when advancing to the footlights . . . [sentimental balladeer Frank Lum] attempted to sing a new song. The audience would have none of it, however. They demanded that he sing the old song ['Old Lake Shore On a Sunday Night'], and sing it he had to. . . . There were no "chestnuts" in those days or if there were the people who assembled in playhouses to be entertained were pleased with them, and demanded their repetition in a way that could not be denied.²⁶⁶

As we shall see, vaudeville's embrace of currency led to a topical engagement that furthered discussions of racism, gender inequality, and labor activity. I would also argue that within Hofstadter's notion of journalistic reform lies an inherently interested populace, one which recognizes that its role as society's constituent elements makes it ultimately responsible for the *de jure* and *de facto* organization, monitoring, and governance of the nation.²⁶⁷ Information regarding the most recent events, the most impressive technological developments, and even the most

²⁶⁵ Edward Harrigan, "The Play's the Thing," Harrigan and Hart Collection, Harry Ransom Humanities Center, University of Texas, Austin.

²⁶⁶ "These Also Made Fun In The Old 'Variety' Stage Times," unknown newspaper, 27 Feb. 1900, Harvard Theatre Collection, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Folder #8.

²⁶⁷ Less interested in this general impulse towards information gathering than in the more formal organizations and movements it produced, Hofstadter also elides the severe national fractures both Populism and Progressivism encouraged, and indeed, depended upon for their spread and maintenance. He largely ignores, for example, the presence of African Americans—even as subjects of the burgeoning movements—preferring instead bland references to the "Negro question." Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform* (New York: Vintage Books, 1955).

scandalous happenings within this nation becomes the only means through which one might ensure just and responsive governance. A firm grasp of the seemingly trivial “new,” in other words, becomes a vivific agent for a critical democracy’s ruling class and separates mob rule from careful stewardship. Moreover, this emphasis on novelty and topicality took root in a genre whose most loyal audience members would attend weekly but whose performers may reside at a given theatre for multiple weeks. Acts that incorporated a great deal of such material therefore cast wide their nets in a search for issues to discuss, fads to parody, or politicians to barb. Though naturally limited by its urban character, vaudeville came much closer to embracing the panoply of American interests and identities than any formal political movement. In so doing, it best represented Progressive America’s interest in a staggeringly wide range of political movements: anti-lynching, women’s suffrage, health care, workplace safety, immigration reform, adult education, etc. Topicality and novelty must therefore be interpreted beyond the pejorative connotations of triviality and ephemerality, and more rightly understood as immunizing an electorate from the specter of demagoguery invoked by the opponents of suffrage, immigration and civil rights. Without such timely and shifting subject matter, the “citizenship role” envisioned by Herbert Gans in a pluralist society remains unrealizable, the reform lauded by Weyl impossible.²⁶⁸

Few acts in vaudeville were immune to a cry for currency that only increased as vaudeville matured. Indeed, the peristaltic grip of a fickle audience threatened any act unable to master the art of reinvention with gradual expulsion. In 1902, Hayes and Healy, circus rider and ringmaster, appeared at Brooklyn’s Hyde and Behman’s Theatre, only to disappoint. “Same old act without the slightest variation throughout,

²⁶⁸ Herbert J. Gans, “Popular Culture in America: Social Problem in a Mass Society or Social Asset in a Pluralist Society?” *Literary Taste, Culture and Mass Communication, Vol. 1: Culture and Mass Culture* eds. Peter Davison, Rolf Meyersohn, and Edward Shils. (Cambridge: Chadwick-Healy, 1978) 285.

either in action or comedy,” attested Henry Behman in his nightly report. “Both are competent artists in their line and make a hit as usual, but a little new matter worked in here and there would greatly improve the act.”²⁶⁹ Behman was less forgiving when Canfield and Carleton presented their comic turn “The Hoodoo” the following year. “This act should be decently buried,” he pronounced. “Everybody is sick of it. These artists have not added a new word or situation to their offering, and it is very tiresome, particularly as they are really clever people and good entertainment should be expected from them.”²⁷⁰ Only Moore and Hight, appearing in Brooklyn later that spring, seemed to have fully grasped the currency Behman placed at the heart of vaudeville. Enchantingly, and very much in harmony with the genre’s foregrounded commodification of novelty, the duo had named their “behind-the-scenes” act “Change Your Act or Go Back to the Woods.” Behman reports it got “rave reviews.”²⁷¹ If vaudeville had one motto—and it had hundreds—it might have been the accolade one critic gave to a comic team playing Bridgeport, Connecticut in 1891. When the duo told a joke, the review enthused, it sounds “as if it had just come fresh from the Garden of Eden.”²⁷²

²⁶⁹ Henry W. Behman, Manager’s Report (Brooklyn), Hyde & Behman’s, 20 Oct. 1902, Keith-Albee Collection, University of Iowa, Iowa City.

²⁷⁰ Henry W. Behman, Manager’s Report (Brooklyn), Hyde & Behman’s, 09 Feb. 1903, Keith-Albee Collection, University of Iowa, Iowa City.

²⁷¹ Hyde & Behman’s, perhaps because of this fixation, held a virtual monopoly on the best acts to play the Brooklyn vaudeville scene. It may have been arrogance bred by such dominance that led Louis Behman, Henry’s brother, to fly in the face of his own house’s codification of novelty as so much *avoids*. Louis, reports longtime *Variety* scribe Epes “Chicot” Sargent, once sought to battle the very ephemeral nature of the ever-new by capturing much of the weekly afterpiece banter on paper. Behman arranged for a stenographer, occupying one of the choice boxes, to spend the season dutifully compiling a “priceless library” of the acts’ material in shorthand. In the end, the vaudeville gods took revenge in a time-honored method of the theatre: a fire destroyed all the records and, Sargent reports, Behman’s interest in catching clouds in a bottle. Henry W. Behman, Manager’s Report (Brooklyn), Hyde & Behman’s, 04 May 1903, Keith-Albee Collection, University of Iowa, Iowa City. Epes W. Sargent, qtd. in Joe Laurie, Jr., *Vaudeville: From the Honky-Tonks to the Palace* (New York: Henry Holt and Co, 1953) 417-18.

²⁷² Review of Poli’s Theatre (Bridgeport, CT), Pat Rooney II Collection, Harry Ransom Humanities Center, University of Texas, Austin.

The tenor and range of reinvention between spectator and performer, unfailingly encoded as masculine in its aggressiveness and willingness to challenge authority, vexed a vaudeville management fearful of regaining variety's reputation as male-only entertainment. In 1908, Pastor, reflecting back on the transition from variety to vaudeville, sighed that his beloved "variety halls weren't considered nice places at all. They had about the same standing as dime museums do now—worse, for no women came to them."²⁷³ Variety's guying and spontaneous plaudits, much abetted by free flowing alcohol, not only endangered vaudeville's "family" image but threatened to once again limit ticket sales to men, a felling blow for the incipient oligarchs of "polite entertainment." Managers (and later chains) therefore engaged in a rigorous and public display of censorship beginning in the late-1880s.

The developing business structure of the form aided them. As management was often wholly unfamiliar with arriving acts, managers began inserting contractual clauses that permitted the cancellation of an act that gave offense or failed to please during the first show. The initial performance, usually the Monday matinee, also allowed managers to write up their lengthy list of required alterations to material and/or presentation, backstage; performers received their individual cuts (and often suggested replacement material) backstage via envelopes bearing "a curt order" from the manager.²⁷⁴ Vulgar language, which in vaudeville could include utterances as otherwise innocuous as "cat's meow" and "rotten," fell under the blue pencil most rapidly. Displays of even the most recondite sexuality, thought to run counter to the female spectator's "disinterest in prurient displays," usually met a similarly swift

²⁷³ Charles Somerville, "Tony Pastor, Starting As The Youngest Actor, Hailed This Week As Oldest On The Stage," 1908, Tony Pastor Collection, Harry Ransom Humanities Center, University of Texas, Austin.

²⁷⁴ Future headliner Sophie Tucker, who admitted herself "one of the worst offenders," recalls "violent and fluent cursing backstage" as vaudevillians received the cuts. Tucker and Giles 149.

fate.²⁷⁵ Dangerously for the era, political humor proved a frequent victim to the censorious impulse of the nervous manager; some houses, fearful of offending an audience member of any political persuasion, forbade even the slightest parody of a sitting president.²⁷⁶ Threats to cancel an entire engagement should the act fail to accept censorship were pithily echoed in a phrase frequently posted backstage: “Don’t send your laundry out until after the first show.”²⁷⁷

Perniciously, institutional censorship in vaudeville grew throughout the 1890s and early 1900s just as “almost every group within the new [middle] class experienced its formative growth toward self-consciousness....”²⁷⁸ Rather than emboldening new adherents to vaudeville through encouraging social consciousness and political engagement, two hallmarks of Progressivism’s most remarkable reforms, managers of the era’s most popular entertainment frequently attempted to desiccate its terrain of possibility through excision of any material that threatened to offend. For the Progressive mind, the illusion of compensatory abundance represented by higher weekly salaries (for the performer) and opulent houses of mirth (for the audiences), both heavily publicized, provided little respite in a nation discovering that increased wealth had “invested enormous political and social power in a business class with little tradition of social leadership.”²⁷⁹ Regrettably, such censorship often successfully pushed from the stage material and methods of performance that might, in unguarded, less elliptical form, have benefited reforms. Certainly, the vaudeville stage sung in a different key than its forbearer, variety.

²⁷⁵ Kibler 46.

²⁷⁶ M.J. Keating, Manager’s Report (Boston), 29 Jun. 1903, Keith-Albee Collection, University of Iowa, Iowa City.

²⁷⁷ Qtd. in John E. DiMeglio, *Vaudeville, U.S.A.* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1973) 21.

²⁷⁸ Wiebe 127.

²⁷⁹ William E. Leuchtenburg, *The Perils of Prosperity, 1914-32* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958) 9.

The manager therefore undeniably functioned as a frustrating intermediary between the performer and the spectator. Where the more Rabelaisian tenor of the variety playhouse had provided seemingly ceaseless opportunities for interactive viewership on the part of its devotees, corporate polite vaudeville all too often removed key opportunities for assertion of meaningful agency by attempting to control both comport and content. There is, in short, no point along the historical continuum that links variety to vaudeville at which an ideal set of circumstances for such agency exists. The variety hall of the 1860s and 1870s contained a great deal of interactivity and politically charged material, as well as wider degree of acceptability in regard to language and characterization. Yet the manager of the variety house, usually a single proprietor rather than a corporate employee, also found it far easier than his later vaudeville counterpart to maintain control over his performers, especially as the actors often composed a quasi-stock company with decent periods of single-theatre residence. As well, one must note that any audience that treasures interaction whilst playing to halls largely composed entirely of working-class men fails to satisfy conditions of pluralistic agency. No theatre so devoid of women and so deaf to contributions from opposing taste cultures and economic classes fits well within the model I have been discussing.

The later corporate vaudeville manager, however, was buttressed with far broader powers of injury to a performer's career than his predecessor. Not only could he terminate that performer's immediate week's engagement, but also he could, through negative reports to the chain's central office, cause lengthy and sometimes permanent blacklisting. As well, the manager usually had little relationship to a particular performer, but instead felt great allegiance to the moralistic adjudications of the prurient forces in the community. (Ministers, in particular, were sources of bedevilment to the vaudeville manager as he nervously trod the line between notability

and notoriety.) Historically interactive audiences, newly enfolded under the protective wing of paternalistic corporate chains, were clearly secondary losers in any system that precluded content without their real-time input. However, the manager was also under duress to keep revenues as high as possible, particularly when uniformly escalating salaries in the years of highest competition among chains (1900-1912) increased the expenses of production. For this reason, they were loathe to heavily modify what they had observed to be a popular act. Audience approbation, therefore, could often overrule the larger ideological leanings of the distant chain. Frequently, local managers feared a lower till more than the occasional complaint.

Nevertheless, the continual resurgence of “forbidden” material argues that trumpeted efforts to purge the vaudeville house of indecent and political elements never truly controlled the stage or auditorium. Several points support this view. First, though most anecdotal evidence suggests that “you obeyed [the orders] or you quit,” individual managers could exercise control only on a weekly basis in a very small fiefdom.²⁸⁰ Despite chains’ attempts to form regional and national webs of censorship via centralized reporting, countless cases of performers resurrecting jokes cut in Cleveland in a later run in Detroit survive in beautiful certainty in the managers’ own reports. Vaudevillians, lodged deeply within a highly interactive performer-spectator relationship, chafed at managerial interference in their attempts to gain audience favor, adjusting Monday’s dance just slightly enough to frustrate Tuesday’s censor. The itinerant performers also displayed an almost viral ability to pass such material amongst themselves (often through stealing one another’s scenes).²⁸¹ A manager

²⁸⁰ Sophie Tucker with Dorothy Giles, *Some of These Days* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Doran & Co., 1945) 46.

²⁸¹ The United Vaudeville Artists, Inc. (UVA) later established a formal means to both protect material and seek damages for infringement. Beginning in the late 1910s, members of the UVA could write out their acts in sometimes painstaking detail and forward it to the central office in New York City. There, the UVA sealed the outlines in dated envelopes and held them for any future challenges. Suspicious vaudevillians could seek damages by proving another act’s performance of material fell subsequent to

might well file a report on one offender only to find the offense itself, having mutated slightly within the grasp of a different act, retaking the stage (often in a different city). As well, as Andrew Erdman suggests, the intimation of censorship, rather than its actual effectiveness, was all that vaudeville required to market itself within a loudening call for purity that involved consumer artifacts from flour to baseball.²⁸² Perhaps most interesting, a Potemkin purity inoculated vaudeville against formal civic censorship, soon to attach itself to cinema, even as it allowed continued enjoyment of eruptions of forbidden material.

More important, the slippage between public codes of censorship and stage product represented in the frustration of institutional censorship functioned as an important staging of resistant agency, one that drew the audience into often gleefully collusive acts of counteractivity with the performer. Managers found that the extensive publicity they had lent to earlier efforts at cleansing the form of questionable material had transformed each performance into a dexterous exercise in circumvention on the part of the eager-to-please performer and an engaged audience. Some performers, as one reviewer marveled of singer Adele Ritchie, danced nimbly right along “the borders of indelicacy and double entendre.”²⁸³ Others occasionally stepped across the line, as was the case with snare drummer Ethel McDonough, a much noted double-threat as a performer: one reviewer bemoaned her “abbreviated costumes,” a second fretted over “songs that are startlingly frank”²⁸⁴ Theatres often discovered that they had crippled their ability to curtail errant material through increasing box office reliance on advertising upcoming acts with huge amounts of publicity. Marie

its own filing with the UVA. The United Vaudeville Artists, Inc. Protected Files, Olson Collection, University of Southern California, Los Angeles.

²⁸² Andrew Erdman, *Blue Vaudeville: Sex, Morals and the Mass Marketing of Amusement, 1895-1915* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2004) 22.

²⁸³ “Real Chickens at Bushwick,” *Brooklyn Eagle*, 14 Apr. 1914.

²⁸⁴ *Salt Lake City Evening News*, 9 Jan. 1912. “A Good Average Bill,” 1911-12 Scrapbook, Pat Rooney II Collection, Harry Ransom Humanities Center, University of Texas, Austin.

Dressler, the week's headliner, once appeared at Keith's Boston house, perhaps the most polite venue in polite vaudeville, in a sketch with language that violated the manager's standards. Against Dressler's wishes, he cut a line. As the house filled with those who had purchased tickets expressly to see the star, Dressler simply left for the train station, "her trunks coming along after her and the manager following the trunk." "She came back, all right," recalled the theatre's properties master years later, "but the line was in."²⁸⁵ Comic actor Charley Grapewin, a former parachute jumper in a circus, appears to have finally obviated the need for remonstrance itself with a "crude" act in which he staggered through his graphic impression of a hangover. "There isn't any use talking about ethics in the sketch," sighs one resigned critic. "There aren't any."²⁸⁶

Management in vaudeville had real teeth: acts were often canceled, audiences sometimes overruled. The managers' publicizing of their sanctification efforts, however, ensured that the act of economic and cultural dominance represented by censorship itself became openly contested terrain, joining laborer and boss in a public struggle over the stage. Interestingly, both parties won. The transparency of managerial prerogative—some managers allowed magazines to reprint their policies on vulgarity and content control—ensured that the audience and performer read every performance through the absent but omniscient gaze of disciplining authority. Understood to be less powerful while the performance was in progress, however, managers escaped culpability even as they profited from the popularity of acts that nimbly counter-stepped the line of censure: moments on stage that violated the well-publicized dicta were invariably blamed on performers (or lower-class patrons in the

²⁸⁵ George Williams, qtd. in Ford, Margaret. "Thirty Years a Property Man," *Boston Herald* 27 Jan. 1935: 5

²⁸⁶ Laurie *Vaudeville* 21. Walter Anthony, "'Cissy's' Toes a Revelation," 15 Jan. 1912, Harvard Theatre Collection, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Folder #19.

gallery). For performers, the agency realized and staged in moments of rule breaking concretized their independence from the manager, completing the escape from the protean anonymity of the earlier variety stock company.²⁸⁷ Additionally, as only a positive audience response could provide temporary sanction of the misdeed, inevitable violation of codes envisioned the consumer/spectator as capable of countermanding the vision of corporate management through a separable relationship with the laborer/vaudevillian.

This battle over precisely for whom the vaudeville house would be fitted, one echoing struggles occurring outside theatre walls, was thus joined in the triangulation of controlling manager, disruptive performer, and active spectator. The combativeness represented in the collusion of disobedient vaudevillian and appreciative audience served as a coalescing force for the wildly disparate reform movements that invigorated the Progressive Era, movements often allied by little more than a fiery interest in unshackling American culture from an increasing and crippling sense of detachment. So bereaved was muckraking journalist Ray Stannard Baker for this acquiescence to what Warren Harding would soon famously laud as “normalcy” that even the sight of a lynched African American in 1905 could not shift his focus from the withdrawn onlookers. “The worst feature of all,” he writes, looking past the victim, “was the apathy of the public. No one really seemed to care.” Baker, in a move characteristic of vaudeville’s reform-minded times, quickly equates a public’s “deep excitement” with its “moral excitement.” The greatest sin in times of systemic injustice, he finds, lies in embracing a civic character insensate to “the faintest of faint spasms of righteousness.” Simply existing within a system permanently placed beyond one’s control, concludes Baker, offers nothing more than “an example of good

²⁸⁷ Alison Kibler has persuasively argued that “the centrality of the single performer in an act” provided female vaudevillians, in contrast to their counterparts in the legitimate theatre, with important new freedoms in negotiating contracts and establishing desirable working conditions. Kibler 84-85.

citizenship lying flat on its back....”²⁸⁸ Also speaking of African Americans, Antonio Gramsci finds such systematic efforts to “isolate and depress” do not end in Baker’s dreaded numbness, but propel the target backward into a regression that creates “for the moment ... a national and racial spirit that is negative rather than positive.”²⁸⁹

Exciting the “spasms of righteousness” sought by Baker required a content-aspect, to use Bakhtin’s phrase, more directly vivified by Progressive concerns than proved the case with many vaudeville turns. Even the keenest cultural critic in the vaudeville house usually had little interest or ease in discerning weighty cultural issues embedded in acts relying on musical pigs, golf club juggling, or buck-and-wing dancing. Many, like Hartley Davis, agreed that the genre’s self-publicized eschewing of “real life” enabled the creation of the mass audience upon which national chains now depended.

There is a cheerful frivolity in vaudeville which makes it appeal to more people of widely divergent interests than does any other form of entertainment. It represents the almost universal longing for laughter, for melody, for color, for action, for wonder-provoking things.

Once gathered, Davis’s plenum, far from being a madding crowd, finds itself numbed into pacific appreciation by a performance that “is an enemy to responsibility, to worries, to all the little bills of life.”²⁹⁰

Vaudevillians therefore did not, as Davis contends, always simply “conceive immensely difficult things for the pleasure of doing them,” stumbling into social commentary in an eager search for new material, but often carefully selected the same targets of excess and malfeasance that attracted the attention of Ida Tarbell and

²⁸⁸ Ray Stannard Baker, “What is Lynching? A Study of Mob Justice, South and North,” *The Progressive Movement, 1900-1915* ed. Richard Hofstadter (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1963) 45.

²⁸⁹ Antonio Gramsci, “The Intellectuals,” *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, trans. and ed. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971) 21.

²⁹⁰ Davis, “In Vaudeville” 231.

Sinclair Lewis.²⁹¹ Anna Caldwell, a comic monologist, floundered in front of a Providence house until she “roasted the trusts and J. Pierpont Morgan,” earning loud applause.²⁹² “High Life in Jail,” a satirical sketch, imagined a prison entirely populated by “bankers, magnates of various kinds, etc.”²⁹³ Spectators, encouraged by an ethos of viewership that continued to engage them as producers of meaning, often moved from Baker’s “moral excitement” into an active participation that threatened to occlude the performer. In 1906 John W. Ransome, a grossly made-up mimic and comic, parodied William Jennings Bryan before a New York audience. Ransome neatly joined the increasingly nationalized vaudeville with its earlier, more local roots in variety by taking the Nebraskan, a thrice-defeated candidate for the Presidency, and inserting him as an interested party in the upcoming New York gubernatorial election. The ploy irritated one visiting critic from *The Providence Journal*, who, after disparaging the make-up and rough-hewn caricature, nonetheless admitted:

Adherents in the audience don't get discouraged, and when Ransome sings, "down with trusts and up with toil," there is enough cheering to enliven a political meeting. It was not until Mr. Bryan, by the Tactless proxy of Ransome, meddled with local politics that he got into trouble. This was the day before the primary election, in which the rivalry between Hearst and Jerome for Tammany endorsement for the governor's nomination would come to a finish fight. The make-believe Bryan came out flat for Hearst. Thereupon the Hearsties yelled, and so did the Jeromers, but the two factions

²⁹¹ Davis 231.

²⁹² Charles Lovenberg, Manager’s Report (Boston), 03 Feb. 1903, Keith-Albee Collection, University of Iowa, Iowa City.

²⁹³ W.W. Prosser, Manager’s Report (Columbus), 16 Jan. 1903, Keith-Albee Collection, University of Iowa, Iowa City.

said different kinds of things, and for a while the actor made his mouth go without being heard at all.²⁹⁴

Managers discouraged this degree of vigor and political engagement with anti-corporate concerns within polite vaudeville, of course, but were themselves often singled during efforts to tamp down the flames of discontent. Four years after Ransome's routine, another act, anticipating a 1912 Bryan candidacy that would never be, staged a sketch set in a railroad depot. A rube character, fresh off the train in the big city, ambles over to the station attendant, eagerly inquiring, "Do you think Bryan will win?" The rube is immediately hit across the face by a wet sponge while a large sign descends from the theatre's flies: "Don't talk politics."²⁹⁵

Many vaudevillians found themselves drawn to such dialogue through personal experience with the concerns of labor. Indeed, because of the centralization of control brought about by the new chains, vaudevillians, more than any other performers, found themselves uniquely and publicly caught in the turn-of-century pincers of consolidated capital and the labor movement. The 1906 institution of centralized booking in the large chains dunned performers with a 5% booking fee. Seen by many as an unjust tax placed upon them for the very honor of signing contracts, the fee was also conceptualized as what others would understand to be Marxian surplus value: the 5% withdrawn from their weekly salary amounted to little more than forcing capital out of vaudevillians' surplus labor. Moreover, some labor leaders within vaudeville, such as George Fuller Golden and Fred Niblo, presciently understood perpetual thralldom to the managers lay as the eventual result of such accumulation. Golden, in impassioned, apocalyptic fashion, suggests that the booking fee has finally locked performers and managers in class struggle over vaudeville itself. Even were the

²⁹⁴ "Novelties of the New York Stage," *Providence Journal* 23 Sep. 1906: 35.

²⁹⁵ Leo J. Curley, "Fun In A Railroad Station," Pat Rooney II Collection, Harry Ransom Humanities Center, University of Texas, Austin: File P.1.

managers willing to withdraw the fee, Golden proposes, vaudevillians should attempt to continue the usually inequitable generation of capitalistically productive labor (again drawing upon Marx), pooling the funds for eventual revolt:

This Fool does know, and it were well if the wiser ones could know it, too:

That into the coffers of whomsoever this five percent shall eventually go, into those hands will also go eventually all the theatres of the world. If it is stopped altogether, and no one take it, then the actors must pay it into their own accounts, and invest it collectively in their own theatres, if they would protect themselves from the menace of greed, or advance in any way unshackled by commercial gyves.... In the hands of the artists, it not only means protection for the producers now, but freedom for the creators of public diversion for all time.²⁹⁶

Haunted by the devastating collapse of their fitfully successful union, the White Rats, in 1917, many vaudevillians remained committed to labor advocacy as the form matured. In some respects, this is surprising. Vaudevillians had never organized themselves for very long. Their continual failure to find strong, practical labor representation within their own field resulted, in part, from the unique and formidable challenges of organizing these particular laborers. Such efforts, after all, demanded coordinating players across dozens of lines (e.g. comedian, juggler), in starkly divergent but oddly intermingled levels of contracts (i.e., big-time, etc.), all while they remained difficult to contact as they traveled ceaselessly about the country. Yet the performers also frustrated their own oft-expressed desires for organization by adhering

²⁹⁶ Golden's suggestion, one in which earlier performers would inevitably force surplus labor from newer vaudevillians, brings to mind Fredric Jameson's contention that "every systemic presentation" of Marxism ultimately betrays the "inner 'permanent revolution'" that characterizes the concept. George Fuller Golden, *My Lady Vaudeville and Her White Rats* (New York: Broadway Publishing C., 1909) 140. Fredric Jameson, *Marxism and Form: Twentieth-Century Dialectical Theories of Literature*. (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1971) 362.

to a central tenet: do whatever one must to get ahead. All vaudevillians, after all, aspired toward the fat contracts and less arduous working conditions that accompanied headlining status on the big-time circuit. Most of the tactics of other unions flew in the face of this push toward stardom: refusing to work during a strike; lowering one's contracted rate to raise that of another act; standing shoulder-to-shoulder with those whose routines, on any other occasion, one might mercilessly plunder, etc. By 1908, less than two years after Albee consolidated his power by centralizing contracts under the new United Booking Office (U.B.O.), R.C. Mudge, president of the White Rats, publicly acknowledged that a strike, the most feared weapon in labor's arsenal, was no longer a possibility for the vaudevillians. While such tactics worked for other labor organizations, Mudge admitted, vaudevillians, simultaneously co-workers and competitors, found it difficult to organize around the long-term goal of pursuing contracts of radically different worth for the same night's work.²⁹⁷ Even when the various unions took pains to include what one reporter termed "performers of the first and second rate" joined in the same cause, the managers' greater strength proved insurmountable. Though vaudeville approached the 1910s as an incalculably wealthy and popular entertainment, the failure of organized vaudeville labor in the face of such formidable and unblinking force, the reporter informed the paper's readers, made it "generally understood ... that salaries will drop...."²⁹⁸ Samuel Gompers and his brethren in the American Federation of Labor would have had little sympathy for the admixture of piteousness and covetousness that should have been emblazoned on the tattered banner of the White Rats.

The managers exploited both this drive for individual glory and the peculiar difficulties of this group organizing by threatening to destroy the livelihood of any

²⁹⁷ R.C. Mudge qtd. in "Vaudeville Men Getting Together," *New York Times*, 23 Jan. 1908.

²⁹⁸ "Vaudeville Men Getting Together."

rabble-rousers. Their most effective tool for this lay in manipulating contracts through the U.B.O., an organization established by Keith and others in 1906. Its ostensible purpose was to regularize what was frequently a series of haphazard arrangements between individual artists and independent theatres. As Robert Snyder has demonstrated, there was some truth to this.²⁹⁹ Vaudevillians often broke a contract at one theatre for a better paying offer in a different part of the country. Performers also attempted to ameliorate the rising costs of railroad travel and baggage fees by performing at a smaller theatre in the same town prior to their chief job in the city, a tactic that watered down the novelty of their performance in the following house.³⁰⁰ Free from any centralized means of monitoring their behavior, performers outside a booking system could misbehave—drunkenness was the most frequent managerial complaint—in one location, and decamp with impunity to the next week’s theatre. In part, performers’ attempts at meaningful, lasting organization failed because early vaudeville labor activists had focused on salary and working conditions, rather than established a system to address these very real problems for the managers.

Yet even had they assuaged the concerns of the chains cum entertainment trust, it is unlikely that Albee and his brethren, infamous for their voraciousness and appetite for total control, would have allowed a labor union to interfere with designs on national dominance. Indeed, vaudeville managers responded to the efforts of the White Rats in the first decade of the century by organizing National Vaudeville Artists, Inc., a manger-operated “union” for vaudevillians. Those performers who refused to join (and pay the managers dues for the privilege) were blackballed from Albee theatres for a time. Managers also increased their importation of English music

²⁹⁹ Snyder 70-73.

³⁰⁰ Tony Pastor, still valiantly struggling along in the chain era as the sole proprietor of a single theatre, amended his standard contract in 1905 to forbid performers from playing in New York City during the week preceding or following their appearance at his house. Contract, 1905, Tony Pastor Collection, Harry Ransom Humanities Center, University of Texas, Austin.

hall performers, partly in an attempt to dilute the bargaining power of American vaudevillians.³⁰¹ Vaudevillians attempted to prevent what seemed like the inevitable consolidation of most power in the field under Albee by creating the Independent Booking Agency in 1907. Unable to gain traction, the following year the White Rats, vaudeville's most well regarded labor organization, joined with a competing performer's union and Albee antagonist William Morris, a manager who controlled over 100 theatres, in an effort to maintain a competing chain of theatres.³⁰² Nevertheless, after a series of conflicts that came to be known as "The Vaudeville Wars," the vaudeville labor movement collapsed in the 1910s.³⁰³ Though the sense of oppression and inequity was palpable throughout the performer base, the presence of the N.V.A., intractability of the managers, and difficulties encountered by the performers when they tried to organize conspired to place vaudevillians firmly under the thumb of their employers. When he sat down to reflect upon a long and varied career, former vaudevillian Groucho Marx was diligent about referring to Albee as "Ol' Massa."³⁰⁴

As a result, vaudevillians, long before the better-known Actors' Equity strike of 1919, carried within their ranks a strong institutional memory of highly systematic oppression by management. Though each aspired to the well-appointed dressing rooms and enormous salaries of the best-known acts, vaudevillians nevertheless strongly identified with the concerns of labor during the Progressive era, a period that saw American organized labor wax in power as vaudeville matured before falling into confusion and disharmony in the first two decades of the twentieth century. Historian

³⁰¹ "Vaudeville Men Getting Together."

³⁰² "Morris Joins Hands With the White Rats," *New York Times*, 01 Dec. 1908.

³⁰³ For a thorough discussion of this period see Arthur Frank Werthem, *Vaudeville Wars: How the Keith-Albee and Orpheum Circuits Controlled the Big-Time and Its Performers* (New York: Palgrave, 2006).

³⁰⁴ Groucho Marx, *Groucho and Me* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1995) 181.

Albert F. McLean, in his early cultural history of vaudeville, identifies the entire genre as a canvas upon which vaudevillians, managers, and audience members alike sketched out the turmoil and dislocation that accompanied this modern condition. “The institutional development” represented by vaudeville’s labor issues, chain development, and rapid growth may be best understood, McLean holds, as part of “the basic need of the American people to comprehend the new wave of industrialism and urbanization in symbolic terms.”³⁰⁵ Vaudeville labor activist Golden saw matters more starkly. The theatre essentially belonged to the performers, the pugilist turned monologist, contended. Long before managers had stepped in to try and control the relationship between spectator and performer (not to mention the space itself), Golden felt, variety performers had simply passed a hat. The chief issue that should govern the audience’s understanding of vaudeville’s labor strife, for Golden, was the same encountered by each individual laborer in the thrall of the era’s trusts: what happens, “now, in a modern age, [when one] dare[s] ask him for a return of the hat!”³⁰⁶

Vaudevillians were keenly interested in Golden’s question. The tens of thousands of vaudeville performers, in staging countless individual performances of labor-oriented material, therefore made use of a crucial public forum in continuing examination of labor issues during the Progressive era. This labor advocacy became particularly important as the Progressive zeal sputtered in the 1920s. Consequently, during the interregnum in the expansion of trade unionism that lasted from roughly 1904 until 1935, acts on the vaudeville stage provided the most widely viewed discussions of a labor movement that “had fallen entirely from sight” after its turn-of-the-century explosion.³⁰⁷ Sully and Kennedy, a comedy duo touring in 1921, played in

³⁰⁵ Albert F. McLean, Jr., *American Vaudeville as Ritual* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1968) 24.

³⁰⁶ George Fuller Golden 96.

³⁰⁷ David Brody, “The Expansion of the American Labor Movement: Institutional Sources of Stimulus and Restraint,” *Institutions in Modern America* ed. Stephen E. Ambrose (Baltimore: The Johns

a popular labor routine, “Open Shop.” Joe Sully, the comic of the act, specialized in a common Italian laborer, while his partner, Matt Kennedy, played the straight man. Throughout the piece, Kennedy’s character performs the role of the straight man perfectly. In a text littered with not particularly well-constructed jokes, he blandly sets up Sully’s Italian for the punch-line:

Straight: What do you do for a living?

Comedian: I aint working just now.

Straight: Why not?

Comedian: Justa because the place where I used to work, the Boss all the time he opened up the windows and doors and I no like, so I close up the windows, and I close up the doors.

Straight: What business have you to close the windows and close the doors?

Comedian: That's my business. That's my business. I'm a union man and I no want to work in open shop.³⁰⁸

In this routine, the character choice is more important for my purposes than the admittedly middling quality of the routine itself. Sully’s Italian represents an ethnic group whose characters had a fitful relationship with American variety entertainment. Unusual in the early second-wave immigration that had centered on German and Irish, the Italian often appeared in Pastor’s afterpieces as an admixture of imbecility and barbarity, racing after some “real ‘nuff Americans” with a knife while lacerating common-sense with his tongue. By the early 1920s, however, a period when Italians, who by that point had handily shifted from day laboring to trade unionism, were often played in national media as “copper-hued” anarchists threatening the common weal, Sully creates a character empowered to criticize his employer in front of a cross-class

Hopkins UP, 1967) 12.

³⁰⁸ Joe Sully, “Open Shop,” Olson Collection, The United Vaudeville Artists, Inc. Protected Files, University of Southern California, Los Angeles: File #2020.

audience. The marginal quality of the jokes is less the point than that they were told at all by a character of this extraction in this venue.

Vaudeville labor material, though tilting toward hopefulness, often reflected the vaudevillian's own sense that the battle against corporate overlords might be insurmountable. Borrowing the device of Shakespeare's slumbering Christopher Sly in the winter of 1912, Tom Nawn's small troupe staged "When Pat Was King." In it, Pat, an Irish laborer, escapes from the drudgery and difficulty of his work by eating a lotus leaf and falling asleep. Drugged into a happy fantasy that removes him from his labors in the piece's second scene, Pat dreams himself to be king, free of all need to serve others for a gardener's low wages and long hours. Then, like the vaudeville labor activists following their impassioned but unsuccessful attempts at gaining more control over their livelihood, Pat awakens disappointed; he is once again nothing more than a common laborer.³⁰⁹

In many respects, much of the vaudeville labor material attempted to waken audience members from their own "dreams" about the lives of the performers. Owners of local theatres made great use of the press in managing public perception about the daily routines and salaries of vaudevillians. In part, they hoped promulgating the idea that a great number of vaudevillians were paid and treated as highly valued artists would increase the legitimacy and high-class associations of the genre itself. However, the wide-spread tales about fabulous salaries and reasonable schedules also functioned as a device to indemnify the audiences against any complicity in managerial malfeasance. Because in vaudeville the product was also a person, audiences became more able to relax in the plush chairs when they were not aware of their own role (as consumers) in furthering inequitable labor conditions.

³⁰⁹ Newspaper review, Orpheum Theater (Des Moines, IA), 1912, Pat Rooney II Collection, Harry Ransom Humanities Center, University of Texas, Austin.

Vaudevillians therefore used the only avenue of address through which they could evade the immediate control of their employers: the stage.

Often, vaudevillians bluntly informed the spectator that their pay and opportunities for future employment rested upon the reception they were accorded. Other acts made inventive use of metatheatricality and direct address to unweave the narrative of the management's public story. "Trifles and Truffles," a one man/four women sketch from 1921, revolves completely around the question of how the expectations attendant to exorbitant salaries actually keep the vaudevillian in eternal penury. The sketch begins with the man's face discovered by a pin spot. He moans to the audience that the "positive craze for new ideas" in the field forces him, in an effort to remain in favor and on the circuit, to spend more than he takes in. "Folks rave about the salary the boob actor makes," he sings. "But they don't pay much attention or else they forget to mention/The money the expense bill takes." He offers to show the audience "just how much it cost," reminding them that if they did not care for it "that money all is lost." Throughout the next section of the song, spotlights pick out a grand piano and "fancy scenery." Lest the audience become too admiring of the splendor, the man reminds them that the cost means he might not be able to afford breakfast. One by one, the four women are introduced, each suggesting that the vacuity of the plot (metatheatricality apparently not being, strictly speaking, its own story) demands the presence of more "swell girls" on the stage. The first woman assures the man that "a hundred and a quarter gets you mother's baby daughter." Noticing that the sketch still lacks a plot, the first woman suggests he can make up for this deficiency by hiring yet another pretty woman to stand in front of the audience. Each succeeding woman raises her requested salary, causing fits of economic jealousy in the earlier women. (Hoping to forestall any future expense, the man excitedly exclaims, "Jealousy! There's a plot!") After hiring the fourth woman, the man insists

that he “is gonna quit right here” before the expense mounts any higher. Turning from his partners, he pulls a blackboard into center-stage and calculates his salary and weekly outlays for the audience:

Blackboard

Act gets \$1000 per week

1st girl 100

2nd girl 125

3rd girl 150

4th girl 200

writers 100

Scenery 100

Booking 100

Costumes 100

Upkeep 25

TOTAL \$1000

The women turn from the despondent man and begin a patter song to the audience:

A mathematician with any ambition could figure this thing out clearly

This man's got an act but still it's a fact, it's going to cost him dearly

A thousand, they say, is all they can pay for acts that are new and untried

But he's got to have us or you'd make a fuss and never be satisfied

You may think it's funny but writers cost money

and scenery costs even more

An item immense is the costume expense. Just look what he's paying for.

(pointing at blackboard)

Finally, the man shuffles down to the edge of the stage and confesses that, despite a weekly salary equal to the annual income of many common laborers, he is unable to afford even the barest necessities. Taking the blackboard with them, the women walk off stage, chanting, “So don't hang around the stage door, girls/Cause he doesn't make a doggone cent/HA! Ha!/He doesn't make doggone cent.”³¹⁰

The man is hardly the innocent party in all of this. Many vaudeville acts, as the audience well knew, traveled simply and still staged enormously popular turns. Additionally, the addled misogyny of the piece—somehow the women become the culprits as he papers over his lack of substance (a plot) with a veneer of “swell” bodies—pushes the sketch out of any place in the Progressive Valhalla. Yet the man is nevertheless clearly intended to be digested as the victim in this piece. The expectations for visual effulgence on the part of management and audience alike have left him with an outlay of capital exactly equal to what would seem, at first blush, to be a high salary. Notice, as well, that a what profit he might have realized, if only it went to providing breakfast, disappeared in the 10% booking fee that went back to the theatre's management. This metatheatrical acknowledgement of the production considerations frequently enforced by vaudeville's elevated taste culture affiliation therefore places all three parties involved in consumption under its lens: the performer, whose lack of originality and substance leads him to glitz up otherwise inadequate merchandise; the management, who walk away with 10% of the salary and expect an act whose splendor exceeds its resources; and the audience, who, we are told, demands the spectacle of the pretty women and scenery, without which they would “make a fuss and never be satisfied.”

³¹⁰ Arthur Swannstrom and Carey Morgan, “Trifles and Truffles,” Olson Collection, The United Vaudeville Artists, Inc. Protected Files, University of Southern California, Los Angeles: File #1892.

When they were not attempting to instruct the audience about the financial difficulties of laboring in vaudeville, the performers often made rich use of symbolism and allegory to address what they felt to be the inadequacies of management.

“Gentleman in Black” (1927), a lengthy playlet, is set in 1789 France. Lionel, owner of a cooperage, is in danger of losing the business due to mismanagement, gambling, womanizing, drinking, and slothfulness. The Gentleman in Black, a minion of the Devil, provides him with capital in exchange for his soul and a promise to try to convert others. A chorus of coopers opens the piece. They are distressed that they lack any control over their futures, and must therefore depend upon an employer whom they view as untrustworthy:

Strong of sinew, full of brawn
We would work from dawn—gladly
All we ask is for our due
And we'll sweat like men for you
Set us then to barrels making
And we'll set our backs to breaking....
And the busy hours while
Away in labor all the while!

Unable to understand that his inattentiveness and high-handedness imperils the lives of his laborers, Lionel continues to push the enterprise toward ruin. At the end of the piece, a lone cooper in the town informs us:

Some people come into this vale of tears
With a silver spoon in their mouth
And others arrive with a wail and a thirst
They live in perpetual drouth [sic]....

Of life, the Aristocrats get all the spice

While I live on cheese and hope and advice

It's all wrong; 'pon my word, it's not nice!

Not all material despaired of the era's magnates living at an eternal remove from those whose welfare should be in their trust. One sketch from the late 1910s or early 1920s, long after vaudeville had supposedly withered into political disengagement, finds a way to bring capital and labor together:

Comedian: *(to Girl)* Your name, please.

Girl: Labor.

Comedian: *(to Straight)* And yours?

Straight: Capital.

Comedian: Capital, do you promise to look out for labor?

Straight: Yep.

Comedian: Don't you call me a yap. And you, labor, have you ever been married before?

Girl: Yes, but my husband died of pneumonia.

Comedian: He must have been working in an open shop. Labor, don't keep Capital in hot water.

Girl: Why not?

Comedian: He's liable to become hard boiled. How long have you known him?

Girl: It was love at first sight.

Comedian: Before I marry you, do you want another look?

Straight: You're a fine minister, you are. You're not fit to marry a jackass.

Comedian: I'm doing the best I can for you. Do you really love her?

Straight: What could be stronger than the love of a blushing bride?

Comedian: Spring onions. Any strong objection to the onion? I mean, the “union?”

(Business) “Labor and capital, I unite you here as one to go forth in the world and see what can be done for an overheated nation, a nation great and grand that's nearly torn asunder by discontented hand. Make it fit to live in. Clean up these nagging cliques. Make it like your fathers did in 1776. Your fathers were a credit, and you're a credit, too. But I'm not working for credit so don't forget what's due.” *(after medley, business by comic)* Goodbye forever. Goodbye. Good luck. You'll need it. *(Wedding march)* That's the end of a perfect day.³¹¹

The delightfully ridiculous nature of the sketch, rife with bad puns and catty colloquialisms, only points up the routine's undeniably serious elements: a death from pneumonia ascribed to existence in a non-labor shop, “a nation great and grand that's nearly torn asunder by discontented hand,” and the minister's final conclusion that harmony between laborer and employer may be unlikely. As well, the decision to make Labor the female party is telling in an era when property frequently resolved to the husband after marriage and both divorces and birth control were difficult to obtain. This might be a marriage, we are told, but it is one with a socio-economically prescribed “lesser” party who will have great trouble seeking a better match in the future. Unlike later American agit-prop theatre, vaudeville labor material, as reflected in this allegorical marriage, embraced the fitful dialogue of negotiation and demonstration that ultimately characterized the growth of organized labor during the twentieth-century. The rejection of more militant workers' activity, anathema to big-time vaudeville's target audience of middle class patrons, might best be seen in the

³¹¹ Support for the trade unionism amongst vaudevillians, some performers later argued, ultimately hurt vaudeville acts. Vaudevillians, never successful at forming their own long-term union, found their relative wages depressed by the rise of other theatre unions, particularly the stage-hand union that had increased backstage costs for the manager. Milton T. Middleton, “Restoring the One-Night Stands.” *Billboard* 03 May 1930: 46, 82.

song one act chose to accompany a Russian character in 1917: “God Save the King.”³¹²

The bill containing the anti-communist nod also demonstrates vaudeville’s propensity to greedily stage material addressing women. The Russian, part of a mute “procession of beauties, each one representing a different country,” was succeeded on the stage of the Palace Theatre by vocalist Elizabeth Murray. A former “queen of the coonshouting craze” that had “all but buried sentimental ditties” in the century’s first decade,” Murray had found the 1910s to be a fallow period.³¹³ Her specialty, a broadside of racist and xenophobic blackface songs, had withered in popularity since its zenith in 1907-08.³¹⁴ A tour of England music halls ended in failure.³¹⁵ While trying to get the Palace Theatre on its feet in 1913 she had contributed to a bill that inspired little more than “vigor and venom” in the critics.³¹⁶ By the time of the 1917 Palace show, however, the singer, staring over the precipice of disfavor, had replaced her former racial material with something closer to the audience’s current interests: Murray followed the train of dumb international beauties with a song advocating women’s suffrage. (“In fine fettle,” she “emerged triumphant.”³¹⁷) In part, the genre’s hunger for newness and topicality made the appearance of such material inevitable. But material on the sexes, as Shirley Staples writes of male-female duos, also enabled performers “to objectify and explain a new social phenomenon in American life, one

³¹² “Gertrude Hoffman Revue,” *New York Times* 10 Apr. 1917.

³¹³ Joe Laurie, Jr., *Show Biz: From Vaude to Video* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1951) 45.

³¹⁴ As Pamela Lavitt explains, “‘Coon shouting’ referred to the distinct performances delivered by female soubrettes to get ‘rough’ and ‘neat’ coon songs across. Coon shouters employed a bricolage of vocal styles and physical gestures, including eccentric costumes, character impersonation, ‘black’ dialect and cakewalking.” Pamela Brown Lavitt, “First of the Red Hot Mamas: ‘Coon Shouting’ and the Jewish Ziegfeld Girl,” *American Jewish History* 87.4 (1999). See also James H. Dormon, “Shaping the Popular Image of Post-Reconstruction American Blacks: The ‘Coon Song’ Phenomenon of the Gilded Age,” *American Quarterly* Vol. 40, No. 4 (Dec. 1988). *American Jewish History* - Volume 87, Number 4, December 1999, pp. 253-290

³¹⁵ Laurie, *Vaudeville* 135.

³¹⁶ Marian Spitzer, *The Palace* (New York: Ateneum, 1969) 17.

³¹⁷ “Gertrude Hoffman Revue,” *New York Times* 10 Apr. 1917.

as important as immigration or urbanization: the changing role of woman, and by implication, man.”³¹⁸

Vaudeville managers, consumed with financial matters, largely viewed vaudeville as being quite up-to-date in its dealings with this “dainty lot.” Though the managerial class remained uniformly male and the display of female form was a time-honored facet of many a successful bill, these gentlemen understood vaudeville to be progressive in the most important, least subjective metric of the game: it paid successful women as much as men. In most respects, this appears to be true. As Albee himself noted in 1914, vaudeville came to maturity in a “feminist age,” one that demanded “significant” representation of and generous remuneration to women. During the 1910s, Sarah Bernhardt took home \$7,000 each week from the Keith-Albee chain.³¹⁹ Other performers, such as Ethel Barrymore, also pulled in far more through vaudeville than they ever could have earned on the legitimate stage. While Albee is factually correct—women, in general, appear to have matched their male counterparts in earnings, a rarity for the period—one must also remember that female performers delivered more to the managers than male vaudevillians. The vaudeville enterprise was dependent, after all, on the sanctification provided by the right kind of woman appearing on stage and in the audience. In handing out weekly pay packets, therefore, Albee, it should be understood, compensated the women not only for their performance, but for the public license their appearance on stage gave for the attendance of other women, their children, and the middle-class in general. Indeed, so significant was the managerial investment in this feminine sanctifying force that Albee sometimes framed the large salaries earned by women as an insulating device, rather

³¹⁸ Shirley Staples, *Male-Female Comedy Teams in American Vaudeville, 1865-1932* (Ann Arbor, UMI Research Press, 1981) 113.

³¹⁹ Edward F. Albee, “Vaudeville a Great Field For Women, Says Albee,” *New York Times*, 15 Mar. 1914.

than compensation. The “munificent rewards” accorded to the female vaudevillian, he informed his public, were abetted by “refined” surroundings and “good-as-gold” contracts to insure “the artiste is safe-guarded at every turn.” (Even the audience he was addressing, Albee maintained, represented the self-selected “pick of their respective communities.”) Only at this point, the manager concludes, did vaudeville become “the ideal profession for women.”³²⁰

As one might infer from Staples’ work on male-female duos and Albee’s paternalistic ideation of vaudeville’s “feminist age,” Progressivism’s New Woman often existed in a binary relationship with a male counterpart. Her newfound individuation and political activity, however, placed her on the field of battle within the vaudeville house. Vaudeville reviewer Eunice Fuller Barnard, writing fondly of the theatrical “waif,” found that the binary relationship actually ensured “woman in vaudeville has always been very much man’s equal.” Because in vaudeville “sentiment is spoofed,” she holds, women maintain a contrapositional relationship to men. For Barnard, vaudeville’s shift from “Romeo and Juliet” to “the Punch and Judy pose” resonates as its greatest gift to the female performer.³²¹ One female theatrical agency manager, a rarity in 1908, found it “natural that the prejudices of the ignorant or the bigoted should be broken down in these days of wonderful achievement....” More than anything, vaudeville simply sought “ambitious girls with talent....”³²²

The “audience anxiety” about shifting gender roles that Staples locates in domestic sketches played out widely across topics as varied as appropriate clothing, suffrage, domestic abuse, motherhood, integration into the white-collar workplace, and vaudeville itself.³²³ Moreover, vaudeville’s national spread, organizational

³²⁰ Albee, “Vaudeville a Great Field For Women, Says Albee.”

³²¹ Barnard 16.

³²² Mrs. Emile L. Fernandez, “Going On The Stage,” *New York Star* 26 Dec. 1908.

³²³ Staples 113.

complexity, and audience diversity ensured its stages witnessed a breathtaking variety of positions in regard to gender issues; being large and containing multitudes, it could not help but contradict itself. In some material, the rising power of women within Progressive America threatened to displace men altogether. “The New (Coming) Woman, and the New ?” (1896) ushers a frankly revolutionary character into the midst of the audience. Promising “we’ll show him how to get reform,” the eponymous, allegorical New Woman—having eased her male counterpart into designation by a titular cipher—proclaims herself a “woman free:” she can box, fence, drink, smoke, vote, pass temperance laws, and clean up Tammany Hall. The man, who “thought he owned the universe and made of us his subjects,” “from his throne is hurled.”³²⁴ Often the object of parody, the New Woman also appeared within vaudeville as but the latest generation of female trend-followers, open to the derision that vaudeville reserved for the very fads it created and propagated. One 1908 sketch features an “enlightened” female professor begging her happily traditional daughter to “expand your ideality [sic] so where you will live up to your highest ideals and be advanced to where I am.” More than anything, she lectures, the incipient New Woman must learn to reconceptualize her skirt as “the root of all evil. Trailing on the ground, it is a gatherer of diseased microbes.” Should the young woman succeed in evolving, the professor promises to use “electro-magnetic character reformer” to “properly develop” a husband for her. It is the job of all New Women, the mother reasons, to “reconstruct” men. Her daughter, protected by the native hue of inexperience, appears skeptical.³²⁵

³²⁴ Sig. S. Schiff and Edward Navratil, “The New (Coming) Woman and the New ?, or, Looking Ahead : Sketch in 1 Act,” American Variety Stage, American Memory Project, 19 Oct. 1998, Library of Congress, Retrieved 01 May 2006: [http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=vasep&fileName=s17436/s17436.data&recNum=0&Layout=Unscaled&itemLink=r?ammem/varstg:@field\(NUMBER+@band\(vasep+s17436\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=vasep&fileName=s17436/s17436.data&recNum=0&Layout=Unscaled&itemLink=r?ammem/varstg:@field(NUMBER+@band(vasep+s17436))).

³²⁵ Joseph A. Golden, “Husband’s [sic] Made to Order,” American Variety Stage, American Memory Project, 19 Oct. 1998, Library of Congress, Retrieved 03 May 2006: http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=vasep&fileName=s12906/s12906.data&recNum=0&Layout=Unscaled&itemLink=D?varstg:93:/temp/~ammem_4MLF::

As vaudeville progressed past these initial volleys over New Womanhood, it continued to offer its audience an unusually diverse assortment of acts addressing gender equality and misogyny, particularly after the attainment of women's suffrage in 1920. One 1921 single male comic song complains a woman's perfidy has consumed the vocalist in "those dog-gone aggravatin', black-as-Satan, woman-hatin'" blues. Future unfaithfulness, he warns, will necessarily lead to "lady killin."³²⁶ Other acts, such as 1912's "Holding a Husband," continued to place stern emphasis on the duty of a woman to "retain the affection" of a man.³²⁷ Yet the vaudeville stage also allowed female performers to complicate, contradict, and ultimately explode the Progressive Era's inherited myths about American women. As Judith Stephens has argued, the period's legitimate drama all too often depends on mechanisms of "recuperation" and "compensation" to return the world of the play to the "dominant gender ideology" of the earlier masculine melodramas. When they acted aggressively, female characters did so only to rebind the community (usually represented by a family) through their maternal and innately moral presence. Thoughts of their own socially individuating desires fled beyond the scope and interest of the play.³²⁸

In vaudeville, however, female characters reached beyond the flattening tropes of self-sacrifice and dutiful communalism in important displays of critique and agency. A 1920s female song situates itself in vocal opposition to the "black-as-Satan" abuse threatened by the earlier blues-weary cuckold, but also places the larger arena of connubial dissatisfaction within the vale of its concerns:

I've just obtained my freedom, no doubt you folks will understand

³²⁶ Jack Yellen and Milton Ager, "High Brown Blues," Olson Collection, The United Vaudeville Artists, Inc. Protected Files, University of Southern California, Los Angeles: File #2196.

³²⁷ Untitled newspaper review, 1912, Pat Rooney II Collection, Harry Ransom Humanities Center, University of Texas, Austin: File #C-12.

³²⁸ Judith L. Stephens, "Gender Ideology and Dramatic Convention in Progressive Era Plays, 1890-1920," *Performing Feminisms: Feminist Critical Theory and Theatre*, ed. Sue-Ellen Case (Baltimore: The John Hopkins UP, 1990) 284-285, 291.

When I say I'm an ex-member of the house wives drudgery band
 I was sentenced to a kitchen by a Justice of the Peace
 With a husband for a keeper and his family as police
 My husband was a clubman as my many scars will show
 And was highly educated in the art of spending dough
 He remained home every evening—long enough to change his clothes
 Then went to visit sick friends in the different Broadway shows
 I will say he was thoughtful in giving things to me
 Such as aprons, wrappers, pots and pans and cotton hosiery
 I tried my best to stand the test as you can plainly see
 When it took a judge named Lincoln to set this poor slave free.
(Chorus)
 Girls, take my advice and stay single, don't fall for the sweet wedding chimes
 It's all very well to say, "Here comes the bride"
 As long as you say it from a pew on the side....³²⁹

Note that this piercing attack on matters conjugal powerfully shifts, at the chorus break, from communal address—"you folks"—to unmediated direct address—"girls, take my advice"—aimed solely at the female spectators from the female performer. That is, at the precise moment in the song when the character relates her emancipation from an abusive, domineering spendthrift, she divorces herself from male auditors, creating an exclusive and excluding gynocentric performance arena. As well, the newer, more progressive intervention of legal authorities (by Lincoln, the judge) intercedes to correct the former "sentence" of marriage handed down by the earlier justice of the peace. The allusion to slavery and implicit identification with abjected

³²⁹ J.F. Gillespie, 1928, Olson Collection, The United Vaudeville Artists, Inc. Protected Files, University of Southern California, Los Angeles: File #UVA #8282.

African Americans completes an important progression away from the dramas Stephens persuasively limns as hopelessly reaffirming *Häuslichkeit uber alles*.

Even when vaudeville management censored such material it often engendered tremendous discussion within the entertainment's national base. In the 1920s, Alla Nazimova toured the Keith-Albee circuit in a short "'plea' for more human divorce laws." By the time Albee ultimately withdrew the piece following protest by a Catholic clergyman, Nazimova had played for eight weeks across a wide swath of the country. Typically, vaudeville's audience, often resistant to corporate aesthetic decisions, had rewarded this well-wrought turn. (One house responded with twelve curtain calls for the "undesirable sketch.") A Denver judge, upon seeing the piece with his wife, decided the sketch, through troubling to corporate vaudeville's frequent attempts to portray a halcyon domestic sphere, played an important role in continuing Progressive reforms. The piece, he argued, importantly attacked "laws that because they are established and maintained in ignorance and defiance of the real truth about society are doing hideous wrong...."³³⁰ Moreover, Nazimova refused to yield gracefully to corporate and ecclesiastical quashing of her vehicle for dissent, but instead demanded payment for her full contract. In the end, one vaudeville reviewer cattily noted, the prim Keith had therefore not only canceled a popular act amidst great public notice but transformed Nazimova, infamous for her supposedly debauched parties at "Garden of Allah," her Hollywood mansion, into "probably the highest paid star in the history of vaudeville."³³¹

Such moments of individuation significantly charged the content-aspect of vaudeville material. "Girl and Dummies" (c. 1922) plays upon the now hackneyed conventions of high class posing acts. The sketch provides its patter comedian with an

³³⁰ Ben Lindsey, qtd. in "Keith Withdraws a Play on Divorce On a Priest's Protest," *New York Times* 31 Oct. 1923.

³³¹ "Keith Withdraws a Play on Divorce On a Priest's Protest," *New York Times* 31 Oct. 1923..

unusual straight man: a masked woman, perched upon a pedestal and portraying, it would seem, the eponymous dummy. Whilst the misogynistic comic prattles on, detailing his views on the sexes, the female performer remains frozen, her face covered by the mask, her body suspended above the stage by the ennobling yet entombing remove of the pedestal. The comic praises Arab sheiks as his model males. “There’s a man after my own heart. He sees a woman he wants, he just grabs her, puts her on a horse, takes her out to the sandy desert and then he squeezes and squeezes and throws her away like an empty banana.” The woman remains frozen. The comic explains his substitution for an actual female partner with the female dummy. “I can’t get along with girls,” he announces to the audience.

I like 'em, oh yes, I love 'em, but with me it's in the words of the famous Hawaiian poet , Ichel-michel-pichel and kichel. Meaning find 'em, fondle 'em, fool 'em and forget 'em.

[Man then] starts growing arrogant. Other talk to show he’s not afraid, etc.

Gleefully noting the female dummy, in opposition to an actual woman, offers “no back-talk,” the comic crows, “Here I’m the boss!” Finally, the stage directions relate vaguely, he “does something to her face.” The woman suddenly breaks from her frozen stance, shakes off her mask, climbs from the pedestal, and strikes the comic full across the face. Her first line of the scene: “So I’m a dummy, am I?”³³² The “face” manhandled by the comic, of course, was nothing more than a mask, the fixed social display demanded of even the post-suffrage American woman. Her forceful engagement with the male, her climb from the literal pedestal upon which he has placed her, her grasp of power—all combined in her knowing shattering of his attempted meta-theatrical collusion with the audience.

³³² Dick Arnold, “Girls and Dummies, Olson Collection, The United Vaudeville Artists, Inc. Protected Files, University of Southern California, Los Angeles: File #2522.

Unsurprisingly, the genre, reflexively molded by the demands of the ticket-buying public on a daily basis, also understood the workplace as a suitable and necessary venue for the female voice. Women, after all, had functioned as highly capable and shrewdly self-promoting specialists since vaudeville's inception, equaling male power at the ticket window and in the manager's concern. Fragments of an untitled song turn from the mid-1920s feature two women alone in a business office. The younger woman, newly emancipated from her domineering parents, has high hopes of joining the nation's booming economy. However, her spirits quickly dim at the dirge sung by the elder woman, a long-time member of the firm. Despite superior skills and intelligence, she sings, chances of success in a man's business world are slim. "You'll find that when you work so hard your head is in a whirl. . . . Your boss will say, 'You're lazy, Miss, I'll get another girl.'" The young woman grows frantic, realizing her sex alone stamps her as unfit for the business world. She finally attacks the Puritan ideal of unrepentant labor, noting that it applies unequally between the sexes. "The more you stew and fret and plan," she sings, "the less you're thought to be." Her elder compatriot agrees, warning of the employer "'Just [when] you ask him for a raise you think that you deserve/ But he says, 'You're in excess now—you're living on your nerve!'" The boss, they grimly decide, "gets all the kale."³³³

Other acts featured women, newly arrived to the city, struggling to earn a living wage. Some female vaudevillians staunchly inverted the vision of capital flow between man and woman, suggesting that men, far from "providing," instead absorbed funds from women, employed outside the home in ever-greater numbers in the white-collar economy, for their own decadence and pleasure. In "The Woman Stalls" (1921), the elder, more experienced working woman returns to find her roommate, gun

³³³ Anonymous, Olson Collection, The United Vaudeville Artists, Inc. Protected Files, University of Southern California, Los Angeles: File #1060.

in hand, contemplating suicide over a lost boyfriend. Rather than dissolving into the melodramatic treacle that would have formerly defined female apprehension of love, the elder character rails against the “wallet-leech” of a sweetheart. Despairing that the younger woman could “let your head out as a public dump,” she holds that romantic love represented nothing more than a “habit.” “Well, cutie, cheer up,” the new mentor comforts. “There never was a habit that couldn't be broken if only you go about it the right way.” The only appropriate use for a gun, we’re told, is against men who take a woman’s hard earned money.³³⁴

Though management certainly preferred a type of woman closer to the high-class Yvette Guilbert, many in vaudeville understood, with Albee, that the form was born in and matured during a great “feminist age” in America. The boldness that encouraged one woman to pursue a boyfriend with a gun was a move along the continuum away from a male-dominated society, a path that also led to Jane Addams’ Hull House, in the period of vaudeville’s maturation, and Margaret Sanger’s American Birth Control League, in the years when the genre began to lose steam. Women in vaudeville therefore deployed and experimented with the brassy archetype that earlier local color playwright Ned Harrigan has termed the American “tough girl.”³³⁵ Some, like the popular Ada Lewis, made a good living at it.³³⁶ Often managers sought to scale back the “inappropriate” boldness of these female characters, many of which were created and written by the women performing the pieces. One turn-of-the-century Providence manager went after whistler Carolyn Young. Though she “whistles well,” he admitted, the act was ultimately hampered by a “tough walk” that

³³⁴ Ralph Schrenkeisen and Archie DeBear, “The Woman Stalls,” Olson Collection, The United Vaudeville Artists, Inc. Protected Files, University of Southern California, Los Angeles: File #2018.

³³⁵ Edward Harrigan, “The Play’s the Thing,” Harrigan and Hart Collection, Harry Ransom Center for the Humanities, University of Texas, Austin.

³³⁶ Newspaper article, “Ada Lewis, the Original ‘Tough Girl’ of the Stage, Adores Her Old Roles,” Harrigan and Hart Collection, Harry Ransom Center for the Humanities, University of Texas, Austin.

demanded alteration.³³⁷ Vocalist Margaret Young toured in the early 1920s with a song entitled “Am I Right?” Beginning with a request to “Please don’t keep still/But just instill/Me with a lot of glee,” Young informs her audience that appearing before them is “a lot of work,” something she does only to pay the newly constitutional income tax. Moving on to damn the Bolsheviks, those “White Heathen of the Tong,” she encourages the audience to help her “send them down where they belong.” In the penultimate verse, she encourages the female spectators, in the event of an unfaithful spouse, to follow her own solution: “I had a sweetie all my own.” Finally, Young, a member of the gender Albee felt helped vaudeville manage its “stage with the good manner of a ballroom,” strikes out at tenement owners:

Let's sing a praise of better days
For the Landlord Profiteer
He's been abused and so misused.
Let's give him a big cheer.
The Poor Landlord is all alone.
Let's yank him from his lofty throne,
Put him underneath a Big Tombstone.
Am I right?

In response, the likely all-male orchestra yelled back, “Right!”³³⁸

It is therefore not surprising that many within vaudeville idealized the genre as a bastion of gender equality within an American theatre so frequently inhospitable to mindfully linking women with actual power. Certainly, female vaudevillians reached a height of influence in vaudeville’s business structure denied to them elsewhere in

³³⁷ Manager’s Report (Providence), 13 Oct 1902, Keith-Albee Collection, University of Iowa, Iowa City.

³³⁸ Margaret Young, “Am I Right?” The United Vaudeville Artists, Inc. Protected Files, Olson Collection, University of Southern California, Los Angeles: File #2018, #2. Albee “Vaudeville a Great Field for Women, Says Albee.”

performance. Vaudeville's frequent focus upon a single performer allowed women to rise into a position of prominence rare in the legitimate theatre. Large salaries and the ability to independently contract one's services to the highest bidder also "often gave women more authority" in vaudeville than they could find elsewhere in American performance.³³⁹ As Dressler's and Tucker's willingness to walk out on managers demonstrates, many female vaudevillians both understood this new power—one tied to popularity and salability of one's personality—and wielded it to great effect.

Yet, vaudeville, in the midst of an explosive growth fueled, in part, by its slavish adherence to the mantras of the emerging middle class, often struggled to provide women an equitable place of their own construction. Indeed, the increased independence and earning power of the female vaudevillian often came welded to an understanding of American femininity that obstructed the female authorial voice and compromised the content-aspect of material that might have otherwise argued for greater social equity. Vaudeville's national rise, after all, came about, in part, from managers' insistence that women's attendance itself consecrated the content-aspect of the wildly varied acts with a homogenizing force of purity. Women's place in the theatre, for some, also threatened to engage women with a directedness that had formerly been mediated through the domestic sphere. Arguing that the home "constitutes a more intense and integral part of her moral spiritual and intellectual life," many argued if time spent in the public sphere could not augment the female spectator's willingness to engage in "home duties" it should at least not strike out against this native inclination.³⁴⁰

Many managers booking routines with an eye toward female spectators focused on the beauty or number of gowns in an act. Women appearing as singles

³³⁹ Kibler 85.

³⁴⁰ F.W. Farrar, *Woman's Work at Home* (Philadelphia: Henry Altemus Co., 1896) 17, 23.

most often sung, excluded from the ranks of the more political monologists. Though women in vaudeville comedy duos were often empowered as “truth teller” in male-female comic duos, vaudeville often provided a far broader range of consciousness for their male counterparts. Playing off the popular recognition of the female crusader (within, for example, the suffrage, temperance, and anti-child labor movements), women found their most critical voices in serious playlets or serio-comic songs. Like African Americans, when they attempted to import their role as truth teller to the more incisive comic spectra white women often feigned unconsciousness as to the efficacy and intentionality of their statements. Gracie Burns remains the classic example of this phenomenon as she blissfully floats along through “Lamb Chops:” she makes all the jokes, she just doesn’t get them. Most insidious, a woman usually required the on-stage presence of a male partner to legitimize her comic voice.³⁴¹ Allen, in another sketch, links her vapid stage persona to the need for partnership. “I’m glad I’m dizzy,” she informs George Burns. “Boys like dizzy girls and I like boys.” Allen’s particular strain of saphophobia, a vaudeville staple for women in a male-female duo, leaves her inert in the midst of political movements that demanded investigation, calculation, and acuity.³⁴² The broad sweep of power, self-definition, and social

³⁴¹ Vaudeville also staged its barely subterranean saphophobia through the nomenclature surrounding female duos. Ameliorating the fear that scores of Boston marriages might be gallivanting about national circuits, performances featuring two women often chose to bill themselves as “sister acts.” It was rare for male duos to follow this lead. Instead, they strongly emphasized distinct identities between individual performers (e.g., “Weber & Fields”).

³⁴² Though the late nineteenth-century spectacularization of the female body lies beyond the scope of this project, it is worth noting that women in vaudeville found themselves increasingly bound to a physical form intended for visual consumption. Unless the age of a female vaudevillian was understood to have precluded sexual ideation, male managers invariably commented upon a woman’s figure, slimness, face, etc. (Sacred culture did not absent women from their duties to feed the male gaze, but instead inserted them anew within the broadening nomenclature of male fixation. Female acrobats might still be “shapely,” but harpists or opera singers were “dainty.”) As well, some women, such as diver/swimmer Annette Kellerman, existed as little more than spectacular forms, their often considerable talents—Kellerman was a champion diver—held captive by a male spectatorial gaze that demanded a sexualized commodity. Others, such as “refined vocalist” Yvette Guilbert, conceptualized as outside the realm of sexual desire, came to inhabit an oddly disembodied place on the stage, expertise allowing them entrance after their bodies had disappeared. For a fuller, if somewhat underconceptualized examination of vaudeville and sexuality see Erdman, pp. 83-126. For a good

critique offered by the vaudeville stage to its female performers was real, but no less complex and self-contradictory for its omnipresence and cultural significance.

Predictably enough, issues of greatest political, economic and social import to African Americans received shortest shrift in white-owned and operated vaudeville halls. During decades in which anti-lynching efforts consumed many Progressives, for example, it appears little to no material even mentioning the issue reached white vaudeville stages. Additionally, vaudeville's fierce clinging to an inherited blackface tradition set up what ultimately proved insurmountable barriers for the authentic African Americans who took the stage as the form matured. Blackness had proved a powerful device for social commentary in the earlier variety theatres, birthing characters capable of agency that ran from aggressive physicality to complex intellectualism. Though tremendously reductive in their liming of African American culture, the variety stage's presentation of African American characters, particularly in the afterpieces, often results in startlingly nuanced characterization of a socially aware, politically committed figure. As Eric Lott argues in relation to antebellum minstrelsy, however, such African American characters (always whites underneath the burnt cork) often fulfilled their critical function only in furtherance of aims of the white working class.³⁴³ When authentic African Americans began and increased a presence in white vaudeville as "colored acts"—frequently, "real coons," in management's patois—the genre appears to have simply disallowed the power of cultural critique it had offered to whites who had worn the cork. Blacked-up white performers, like other white

treatment of the spectacular body see Jon Stratton, *The Desirable Body: Cultural Fetishism and the Erotics of Consumption* (New York: Manchester UP, 1996).

³⁴³ Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*. (New York: Oxford UP, 1993).

vaudevillians, also usually failed to incorporate civil rights material into their own acts.³⁴⁴

When such content did manage to find the vaudeville stage, it swayed fatalistically, evincing little of the muscular assertiveness that characterized other arenas of advocacy within the genre. The burgeoning Americanizing impulse that enchanted Progressivism presumed a mutability based on will within white, European ethnicities that it denied to race.³⁴⁵ An Irishman could *play* an African American, but he could *become* an American. Fettered by this hopelessness it had helped promulgate through educative reform movements aimed at white immigrants, the Progressive Era enjoyed only limited meaningful race dialogue in its white vaudeville houses. Few of these routines believed in the likelihood of ensuring equity for African Americans, but instead joined the example set by singer Martha Leslie in 1929. Leslie, playing an octoroon boy, unveils a character that would at first glance appear to be the ideal subject for Progressivism's many reforms. "Denied station and ambition/ embittered by my condition," the boy nonetheless graduates from college at the head of his class. In a meta-theatrical aside, the character/performer bemoans a career in which "I dance, I laugh, and I show my teeth" to hide the fact that "only God and I know my grief." He begs the audience to "hear the cry of lost ambition" in his voice. In the end, in stark contrast to the vista of possibility usually imagined by the Progressive Era and its most popular form of entertainment, the boy succumbs to the gravitational pull of the

³⁴⁴ White performers who continued to appear in blackface were themselves swept up in vaudeville's increased uneasiness with cultural critique emanating from under the cork. Most blacked-up white performers in mature vaudeville migrated to material unadorned by the often scathing cultural commentary that would have been common to variety audiences in the 1870s. The cultural memory of Al Jolson's splayed palm "mammy" routines lingers so pungently in part because, though in most ways the least compelling blackface material to take the American popular stage, it was the last act of its kind standing.

³⁴⁵ Werner Sollors finds the framework of the Americanization movement to be one of "consent," in opposition to other schools arguing for an understanding of ethnicity as arriving through "descent." Werner Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture*. (New York: Oxford UP, 1986).

one-drop-of-blood, an argument more redolent of Boucicault than Bryan. “I must be content in a menial place,” he relents, because of “the Congo blood in my veins.”³⁴⁶

Vaudeville found greater, if problematic and complex arenas of freedom for material addressing white non-Anglo ethnicity. Polite vaudeville just preceded the wide cultural cry for “Americanization.” The schools of American education-cum-indoctrination founded and funded by some of the more ardent Progressives usually required non-Anglo white Americans to surrender an increasingly othered ethnicity to achieve full integration. Corporate managers in big-time vaudeville, equating non-Anglo ethnicity with the rowdyism thought to chase away many middle class patrons, often demonstrated an eagerness to aid these efforts. Keith commissioned a pro-Americanization essay from James J. Davis, Secretary of Labor, in 1923. Insisting “in many cases the melting pot has ceased to fuse the elements within it, because it has been filled to overflowing,” Davis proposed “compulsory education for the adult who comes among us,” without which “he cannot become worthy of America.”³⁴⁷ Both corporate and independent vaudeville usually joined most Progressive thought in viewing non-Anglo ethnicity as a transitory state, unsurprising in a genre that continued to employ ethnic and racial stereotypes with such abandon.³⁴⁸

³⁴⁶ William Eugene Lynck, “Revue la Petite,” The United Vaudeville Artists, Inc. Protected Files, Olson Collection, University of Southern California, Los Angeles: File #8406.

³⁴⁷ James J. Davis, *B.F. Keith's Theatre News*, week of 09 Apr. 1923, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library, New York City, New York.

³⁴⁸ As Alan Trachtenberg notes, the waxing era of corporations and professionalism in the late nineteenth-century infused American social and artistic movements alike with a new sense of organization and systemic implementation. Corporate vaudeville's embrace of Americanization, though profound, was never as fully integrated into its ethos and daily operations as would be true of contemporaneous social movements. Befitting a genre that all too often lived in quarter-hour jots of frenetic activity, vaudeville's promulgation of many facets of Americanization (e.g., adopting English as one's first language, a high degree of overt patriotism) was often far less nuanced than with more comprehensively minded bodies, such as the settlement house movement. Jane Addams, founder of Chicago's Hull House, joined many in vaudeville by conceptualizing ethnic identity in America as moving inexorably along a continuum from immigrant to fully-Americanized second-generation citizen. She nonetheless bemoaned the “insolent break” between generations engaged in this process while positing that hunger for undeniably “American” artifacts (e.g., garments similar to those worn by native-born citizens) led to an increase in juvenile crime. Moreover, the settlement house movement, unlike vaudeville, cottoned less to an ideal of ethnic transformation as one of fairly rapid conversion,

Some vaudeville theatres, however, particularly those playing in ethnic neighborhoods or simply outside business districts, allowed non-Anglo white characters or performers to function as truth-tellers. One comic sketch nicely calls both civic authority and vaudeville's obsession with prurience to the dock:

Italian: Oh, the son-of-a-gun.

Straight: Here, here, don't you swear around here. You know who I am, don't you?

I'm the law.

Italian: Say, and you know who I am?

Straight: No, who are you?

Italian: I'm the common people, and the common people pay you the salary.³⁴⁹

Though ethnic characters within vaudeville sketch comedy were not necessarily represented by members of the referenced group, routines such as the one above attempted to frustrate images of ignorant or cowed masses huddling shipboard. In such instances, ethnic distinctiveness shielded the bearer from the unaware acceptance of injustice fought by Progressives. When "real" ethnic performers did essay the roles it provided an opportunity for native-born audiences during the Progressive Era to witness the displays of expertise that were coming to define professionalism (for the middle class) and trade specialization (for the working class). Observing one talented (and authentic) Italian act, an impressed reviewer informed his presumed audience of native-born readers, "Ignorant mountaineers and clodpoles are not the only Italians who pursue the New World mirage."³⁵⁰

instead acknowledging the passage as an often painful evolutionary process that left behind as many as it welcomed forward. Jane Addams, "The New (Coming) Woman and the New ?, or, Looking Ahead : Sketch in 1 Act," ed. Mary Mark Ockerbloom, Project Gutenberg, May 1998, Retrieved 25 Sep. 2008: <http://www.gutenberg.org/dirs/etext98/20yhh10.txt>. Alan Trachtenburg, *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1986).

³⁴⁹ Oliver De Grant, The United Vaudeville Artists, Inc. Protected Files, Olson Collection, University of Southern California, Los Angeles: File #5377.

³⁵⁰ "Night Life in the Bend", 1899, Harvard Theatre Collection, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Folder # 7, p. 4.

Frequently, performances echoed native-born American culture's sequential conflations of non-Anglo ethnicity with immigration, and immigration with poverty (the latter often a fair assumption). This tendency furthered false and pejorative stereotypes; well-to-do or native-born non-Anglo ethnic characters remained the exception on the vaudeville stage. If such enactments aided in ossifying an already inflexible typology of American ethnicities, however, they also placed poverty and political disenfranchisement, indeed the dominant concerns of many non-Anglo Americans, at the center of those sketches committed to the development of Progressive reforms. "Ellis Island Rose," sung by Lucille Doner, presented a Russian immigrant stranded in the bureaucratic nether-world of the island's immigration services:

In the shadow of Statue of Liberty

Like a captive they are holding me

Just like every immigrant

From across the sea

I am wondering when they will set me free...

After having "worked like a slave/ to pay my passage over here," Rose is finally deported by "Mr. Inspector." "Only God in heaven knows," finishes Doner's plaint, "what's to become of poor Ellis Island Rose."³⁵¹

Herbert Gans debates whether popular culture such as vaudeville functions as a "social problem or social asset" for a nation astride widening poles of enjoyment and engagement. Reassuring himself that "a good life can be lived on all levels of taste," he abandons the masses to their dinette sets and violent television, but cannot help mourning the efficacy lost within popular forms. "The higher cultures," he writes, "provide much more adequate information for the citizenship role, for solving

³⁵¹ Bennet & Carlton, "Ellis Island Rose" uva #8388

personal and social problems, and for reality testing.”³⁵² Gans’ kind-hearted dismissal of popular culture’s socio-political utility centers around a model of citizenship that is observant in nature. His is a society in which the creator/artist, unencumbered by audience interference, presents significant works that may be consumed, evaluated, or dismissed, but which remain immune to interactive production on the part of the audience. Such works exclude their audience though a production that is, as Gans notes, “creator oriented,” rather than event oriented. The impenetrability of their production, whereby the cultural object of performance arrives already sealed to the sculpting influence of the audience, frustrates the interrogation presumed of Hofstadter’s “journalistic mind.” Hampered, too, are the collective “organizational achievements that constituted true progressivism....”³⁵³ Therefore, Gans errs, in part, because the popular forms he finds less capable of developing the tools for citizenship are also the entertainments that, like vaudeville, enabled the civic camaraderie and popular control that are the truest manifestation *of* the citizenship role he lauds.

We have in vaudeville, therefore, a form that provided an astoundingly popular crucible for individual and collective action. At times, it acted as an adjunct to a legitimate stage whose depth of discussion, complexity of analysis, and span of time for presentation all too often dwarfed its variety cousin. Yet vaudeville excelled at providing spectators a healthy dollop of the Jacksonian engagement that transformed them into actors during the event. In making use of this, audience members gained a critical appreciation for and practice in the real-time, forcible engagement that Progressive intellectuals and activists alike argued was essential for the success of the movement’s efforts. Though vaudeville certainly did not gambol about as freely as the Bacchanalian theatres of the early-nineteenth century, neither did they exclude

³⁵² Gans 285.

³⁵³ Richard L. McCormick, “The Discovery the Business Corrupts Politics: A Reappraisal of the Origins of Progressivism,” *The American Historical Review*, 86, No. 2 (April 1981) 249.

over three quarters of the population from their halls. Even the presence of institutional censorship provided a boon to modeling (and within the halls of the theatre, enacting) Progressive reform, inasmuch as the active, much publicized presence of the managers and their cut sheets permitted acts of resistance against an actual target, one that, in this case, almost directly mirrored the oppressive “plutocrats” about whom Progressive intellectuals spilled so much ink.

All of this exercise of agency counted for more in the vaudeville house and more directly abetted Progressive reforms precisely because the material itself often revolved around areas targeted by the reformers. It is probable that most sketches lambasting police brutality or songs bemoaning hunger did arise out of a revolutionary impulse. Though some clearly trod the boards with an eye toward equity and justice, most vaudevillians do not appear to have consciously used the stage to further the aims of Progressive reformers. Indeed, for every playlet excoriating an androcentric workplace there appeared a turn of high-fashion poses that objectified women. The content of the acts, as we have seen, was much more far-ranging and the address far more pointed than vaudeville’s frothy reputation would have one believe. Within the contested space of the theatre, vaudevillians sang against open shops, hurled barbed jokes at pay inequity, and caricatured ineffective politicians. Wage earners had their day on stage, as did uptown swells. Some material was choked with (and appreciated for) a simplistic patriotism that sometimes lapsed into variety-era jingoism.

Elsewhere, American exceptionalism, whose myths, in the words of historian Vernon Parrington, had become “a convenient refuge for the bats and owls of the night,” were frankly labeled “bull.”³⁵⁴ It was vaudeville’s voracious requirement for new material, more than anything else, which allowed counter-hegemonic material on the stage. The

³⁵⁴ Parrington 10. Paramo, Jay Ramond, and Whitehead, “Ten Minutes With the Bull,” 20 Sep. 1920, Olson Collection, The United Vaudeville Artists, Inc. Protected Files, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, File #2218.

need for 50,000 performers to topically engage an audience simply overwhelmed any censorious or normative impulses on the part of the manager and chain that might normally have been brought to bear against the lone vaudevillian. Ironically, therefore, the chains, in their creation of a far-flung, national enterprise, ensured that the business practices of trusts such as their own would be nightly challenged in front of their own customers.

Vaudeville's frequent and life-long dialogue around issues such as racism and labor unrest cannot wholly indemnify the genre against the sentiment reflected in Gans' dismissal of popular culture's efficacy. Much of the material in vaudeville halls, those bastions of trained mules and clog dancing, evaded the concerns of its era through unrelenting pursuit of what one critic waggishly termed a "supreme master[y] of twaddle."³⁵⁵ Yet given what we have seen of the material that addressed poverty and domestic roles, I would argue that one must understand vaudeville's frippery as having arisen for three reasons, only one of which supports the traditional dismissal of the genre's content. First, the relative brevity of the acts and need for immediate approbation meant that performers and management often sought the most direct route to the audience's affection. Often this led to easily digestible fare that entered the audience's consciousness through avenues created by fare that had previously appeared in various other media and entertainments (e.g., legitimates stage, newspapers).

Next, the sheer number of performers on the circuit meant that gross tonnage of *every* type of act increased, particularly those that lay within the grasp of less talented and experienced performers. With 50,000 performers playing in vaudeville at its height, it was inevitable that many of the acts were trifles or appeared highly

³⁵⁵ Bland Johaneson, untitled article, Harvard Theatre Collection, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Folder #19.

derivative. To dismiss the socio-cultural efficacy of the larger form because of the great number of middling acts, however, would be akin to damning the social relevancy of rock music in the late 1960s when less expensive instruments and the wide-spread dissemination of LPs caused an upswell in garage bands.

Finally, as is demonstrated by the many acts discussed in this chapter, vaudeville had a tendency to make profound statements about American culture in a way that could alternatively be read as inconsequential. Carolyn Young's whistling act came under fire for her violation of the manager's preferred mode of female decorum. The "tough walk" that drew attention (along with her decision to "dress in very bad taste") challenged the expectations of domesticity, innocence, and femininity by which corporate vaudeville marketed its halls.³⁵⁶ Yet it was, in the end, a ten minute-long whistling act, not a sonnet or a full symphony. The pun-choked allegorical marriage between Labor and Capital ends with a lamentation for the future of American labor relations, but also includes, in its last few lines, a terrible joke about "the state of the 'onion.'" It is foolish to deny the rank foolishness and frequent putridity that played the vaudeville stage. No genre that incorporated so many performers for so long in so many different sub-genres of performance (e.g., opera, acrobatics) could reasonably hope otherwise. When theatre historians of the period dwell at length on realism, the Little Theatre movement, and early O'Neill while ignoring the theatre that most members of every class were attending, it is, I believe, partly in recognition that so much of what occurred in vaudeville fails the high-culture oriented tests by which traditional theatre scholar so often judges the popular.

Moreover, vaudeville continued to feature audiences with a moderately high degree of interactive production well after other forms (e.g., realistic theatre, classical

³⁵⁶ Manager's Report (Providence), 13 Oct 1902, Keith-Albee Collection, University of Iowa, Iowa City.

music performance) had seen fit to banish them from the hall. It was not the rowdy assemblage of the Jacksonian theatre. The manager's fidelity to the understanding of middle-class mores and upper-class sacred culture had seen to that. However, in the loss, in the final arrival of the vaudeville audience at something that might indeed be termed "moderation" in its interactivity and assertion of agency, I believe, we arrive at a unique and efficacious point in American audience history: balanced on one side by interactivity and an institutional memory of the earlier variety hall, and on the other by the social mores that encouraged restraint, contemplation, and self-governance. Its surrender of its frequently volatile past allowed for fuller hearings of a rich array of different positions.

Finally, the content aspect of vaudeville encouraged public debate on a host of issues vital to Progressive America: feminism, marriage, labor strife, trusts, the role of government, poverty, ethnicity, and race. Though some of its fare was decidedly apolitical and frothy, much of the material tackled the most pressing, difficult issues, and did so in a cross-class setting with a mixed gender audience. Admittedly, the politically and socially committed material that did fall under the lens of the audience often bore the imprint of its times, reinscribing upon the performance the "impersonality and alienation" visited upon subjects of systemic inequity, particularly women and African Americans, outside the theatre's walls.³⁵⁷ Yet vaudeville, naturally circumscribed by its times and its frequent interest in frivolity, maintained a stunning breadth to its content, providing a critical popular staging ground for address of race, gender, economic disparity, and just governance.

S.S. McClure, writing in 1903 in his eponymous magazine, challenges his readers to rethink their understanding of corruption (labor, he warns, is as prone to

³⁵⁷ Donald Meyer uses this phrase in reference to the development of social-gospel doctrine within Progressive thought. Donald Meyer, *The Protestant Search for Political Realism, 1919-1941* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 1988) 33.

venality as capital) and move toward aggressive confrontation of wrongs. First, however, he warns them that they can expect no aid from those thought to man the barricades: lawyers, judges, clergy and colleges, all range from ignorant to corrupt to pernicious. Casting a woeful gaze over his new century, the editor finally decides, “There is no one left; none but all of us.”³⁵⁸ Vaudeville, in its embrace and propagation of Progressivism’s ethos and operations, flowered as that certain strain of art that plunged with its consumer into Adorno’s “arduous process of real experience.”³⁵⁹ In 1902, as vaudeville enjoyed its rapid burst to the popular pinnacle of theatrical entertainment, one critic marveled that some performers could be lured into the stodgier, less engaging realm of legitimate theatre. Casting his eye across both audience and stage, however, he assures his readers, “In the ranks of vaudeville which they are deserting in the natural course of events, an army marches onward to glory!”³⁶⁰

³⁵⁸ S.S. McClure, “Concerning Three Articles in This Number of McClure’s and an Article That May Set Us Thinking,” *McClure’s* (January 1903).

³⁵⁹ Theodor Adorno, “The Schema of Mass Culture,” *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture* ed. J.M. Bernstein. (London: Routledge, 1991) 69.

³⁶⁰ Charles R. Sherlock, “Where Vaudeville Holds the Boards,” Vaudeville and Variety Collection, Harvard Theatre Collection, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Folder #10.

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CHAPTER 3

“AGAINST THE DIVIL:” ETHNICITY, INVESTITURE, AND ERASURE IN VARIETY ENTERTAINMENTS

In 1919, C.F. Switzer, a junior high school principal from the American Midwest, cast his eye over a nation recently roiled by war and mournfully isolated “the problem:” waves of immigrants, most of whom lacked even “the basic requirements of citizenship,” were descending upon the country.³⁶¹ Beset by ceaseless waves of such newly minted Americans, Switzer ponders the deficient “attitude of mind” possessed by those who have yet to choose to become “a good American.”³⁶² The seemingly pacific debut of the 1920s offered no solace to the beleaguered educator. Indeed, Switzer contends, “post-bellum problems of immigration and assimilation” promised to “loom as giants compared with those of today.”³⁶³ Yet he refused to frame such problems as insoluble, if only because he also conceptualized the immigrant as an unavoidable and continual presence within the United States. “The important fact for us is that he is here,” Switzer shared with his presumably native-born readers, “and that he must be reckoned with as a mighty factor for social good or ill, for national strength or weakness.”³⁶⁴

Perhaps predictably, given both his profession and his enlodgement in the Progressive era, Switzer finds that the blockade presented by resistant, non-native-born ethnicity to the European immigrant’s ability to “travel the citizenship road” may be overcome through education. Only the reforming, de-ethnicizing development

³⁶¹ C.F. Switzer, “Larger Plans for Americanizing the Foreigner,” *The Elementary School Journal*, Vol. 19, No. 5, (Jan 1919) 367, 368.

³⁶² Switzer 368, 370.

³⁶³ Switzer 374.

³⁶⁴ Switzer 367.

offered through absorption of American mythology will “make the road so attractive that he will desire to make the journey” toward authentic citizenship. Even if “he is not interested in the proposition,” Switzer maintains, the immigrant, must learn to “suffer with Washington at Valley Forge, breathe the fire of Anthony Wayne, and absorb the spirit of Lincoln.” The surrender to such cultural archetypes, we are told, will help one move beyond the place of “a servile worker.”³⁶⁵

As with the writings of many of his fellow reformers, Switzer’s careful, analytic, and bluntly passionate treatise finds its energy in genuinely altruistic aims. Switzer recognizes that the standard evening classes for immigrants robbed an entire class of what little leisure and family time remained after jobs that “require the full exercise of muscles” throughout the day.³⁶⁶ He also notes that true exercise of suffrage required English literacy, an especially powerful argument for the year in which the Nineteenth Amendment was proposed. Shifting non-English speaking immigrants away from their native tongues answered what the principal saw as a “powerful plea for democracy.”³⁶⁷ Yet Switzer also represents the endgame of native-born white Americans in their century-long struggle with persons from “elsewhere.” Authentic citizenship, for Switzer, required a sundering of one’s cultural history and adoption of a carefully maintained set of mores, characteristics, and actions all too resistant to the pervasive influence of the United States’ increasingly diverse citizenry. It became, in effect, a world more peaceful and free for its erasure of difference.

Anxiety around difference itself was expressed throughout countless performance traditions in mid-nineteenth century America. Minstrelsy, arising in the 1830s to become the nation’s most popular form of variety theatre, placed Othered blackness perpetually before the “native-born” gaze. Lecture halls, the didactic

³⁶⁵ Switzer 370.

³⁶⁶ Switzer 371.

³⁶⁷ Switzer 372.

theatres that became staples of dime museums throughout the century, turned their attention continually toward topics rarely openly discussed in the developing “polite society” of the emerging middle class: intemperance, adultery, and lasciviousness. Closer to my own interests, the variety hall, that wild, male-dominated crucible of the urban working class, charged its nights with ceaseless, terribly complex discursions on the ethnic matters of its day. Immigration, marriage outside kinship bonds, and the ethnic composition of the “lower ten thousand” citizens all reared within variety theatres as objects of absolute fascination for the denizens of the smoke-filled halls. And no part of the variety theatre evening provided so rich a tapestry and so electric an environment as the afterpiece, the playlet that both succeeded and defined the earlier part of the bill.³⁶⁸

In the first section of this chapter I discuss the presence of ethnic material in the pre-vaudeville variety theatre afterpiece during the 1860s and 1870s. I begin this analysis through an examination of a character rarely addressed within discussions of “ethnic” performance on the American stage: the exemplary, unimpeachably white male hero. I contend that a modern understanding of this figure is best served by acknowledging him as an inactive hero, a protagonist manifestly unable to pull forward the central action of the piece. So denuded of useful characteristics by the cleansing bath of assimilation is he that the pieces ultimately must call upon characters who have proven more immune to the siren song of Americanization. He is, I argue, a dependent character, a central figure in eternal search of adjuncts so that he might succeed. In his seeking, he validates the importance of immigrants within his nation.

I also pay particular attention to the manner in which the pieces elaborated

³⁶⁸ The variety afterpiece was a one-act play (often called a “playlet”) that ended the variety bill. Running anywhere from fifteen to forty-five minutes, the afterpiece usually featured performers from previous specialties in often intricately crafted narratives. Stories frequently played upon either American mythology (the American Revolution being a favorite topic), or topical issues of the working class (e.g., labor conditions, immigration).

upon, fixed, and enacted popular native-born fantasies of ethnic Others. Though such performances most often served hegemonic desire, this migration between various ethnic selves enacted in the varied bills, I argue, subtly preserved contradictory readings of ethnicity that preclude any actual fixity. As with the modern nation state, we must also come to comprehend ethnicity as a peculiar beast of communal creation, one dependent upon ephemeral fictions that obscure points of origin in the pursuit of an unassailable essentialism. The understanding of ethnicity in Tony Pastor's variety theatres, my initial concern, is both rooted in a mythical infinite regression (e.g., there has always been an Irish people) and engaged in a continual series of negotiations about its core identity. In so doing, I mean to place such performance at the center of ethnic formation during this period, arguing that the performance of ethnicity on these stages played a crucial role in the nation's evolving conception of ethnic transmutation.

In the second section of this chapter I examine the gradual weakening of ethnic performance in variety's successor, the vaudeville hall. Moving beyond Lawrence Levine's influential arguments concerning the enervating effects of polite culture on popular ethnic performance, I argue that important and allied shifts in vaudeville's business structure, the nation's immigration patterns, and the ideology of Progressive Americanization mandated ethnic performance surrendering the popular stage. Above all, I would argue, ethnicity must be viewed as a conceptual framework centered upon the utility of its constructs. While, in an historical sense, ethnicity resists absolute geographical or genetic centering, the services such identifications render to both those within and without their borders are both demonstrable and powerful.

Lamentably, my arguments must confine themselves to American stagings of European ethnicity. Staging that brought Americans of European, Asian, African, and aboriginal descent into conjunction during this period are simply too large to compass

when laid alongside concerns of multiple European ethnicities. Additionally, I am greatly concerned with the issue of one's identity shifting from out-group to in-group through the processes of acculturation. Though such passage proved far more difficult than tucking in one's *tallis* or lopping off the socially nettlesome final syllable of a surname, this migration remained, to varying degrees, within the scope of enactment for most white citizens. Neither African Americans nor Native Americans possessed the social mobility that Ernest Gellner argues was necessary to "engender egalitarianism."³⁶⁹

Finally, running throughout the various topics I explore in this chapter lies an interest in how the theatrical hegemony used ethnicity for other purposes often unrelated to discussions of ethnicity itself. I join many recent scholars in believing that ethnic characters and acts, for the largely white, heavily assimilated audiences of the English-language variety and vaudeville houses, became avenues through which they could discuss matters such as gender roles and the importance of economic class in modern society, though such discussions necessarily came to involve positions regarding ethnicity, race, assimilation, and acculturation as well. In effect, I view the presence of ethnicity in variety theatre performance as innately egalitarian in its ability to compass nearly every other facet of society under its gaze.

Egalitarianism was not often a prized element in nineteenth century popular performance. Indeed, the era's most notable contribution to American humor, minstrelsy, relied upon staging conventions and a tenor of address that cannot help but appear blinkered, insensitive, and cruel within a modern framework. Rather, much of the period's humor, as Eric Lott has argued, functioned as a means by which one ethnic in-group could at once subsume and yet play through the skin of another in articulating an often terribly limited sense of the commonweal: those most like

³⁶⁹ Ernest Gellner, *Culture, Identity, and Politics* (Newcastle upon Tyne, Cambridge UP, 1987) 93.

oneself. Entertainment staged by members identifying with the self-same ethnic group, such as the German concert hall in the mid-nineteenth century or the Yiddish theatre of the early twentieth century, therefore often concentrated on the challenges faced by recent immigrants and ethnic “outsiders.” These entertainments, usually owned and operated by those with kinship bonds to the targeted clientele, understood and limned the non-Anglo white American in far different fashion than the halls such as Pastor’s. While non-English language houses contained characters drawn from the same crudely drawn ethnic groups as those in the native-born American houses (e.g., German), they often featured them in more sympathetic, nuanced portrayals than would be afforded in the English-language houses. It is therefore impossible to speak of “ethnic performance” in the variety theatres of the nineteenth century with anything approaching a degree of universality. Precisely who was ethnic/foreign changed radically from house to house, a phenomenon that was to continue throughout the century.

This was particularly true of the variety theatres managed by variety impresario and vaudeville pioneer Tony Pastor in the period from 1861-1881. Pastor, though himself the son of Italian immigrants, appears to have imagined himself as largely post-ethnic in his identity. He was an “American,” more than anything, a devotee of George Washington and the garishly large flags that frequently invoked the general’s presence in pieces penned by Pastor. When he identified loudly with any group outside of the nation of his birth and citizenship, it was not ethnicity that drew him, but economic class. Throughout his lengthy careers as performer and manager, the onetime sawdust circus clown maintained a pugnacious affinity for those who struggled in the shadows of the “uptown swells” who appeared to have New York City under the heel. Pastor’s interest in matters of social, economic and cultural equity appear to have been genuine and deeply rooted in his early exposure to working class

audiences in minstrelsy, circus and the concert saloon.³⁷⁰ Long after his 1881 uptown move shifted his theatre over to a more well-to-do audience base, Pastor continued to present material that understood the comfort of the “upper ten thousand”—many of whom were now his patrons—as resting unfairly upon the backs of the working class.

In part, we may understand this affinity as a result of Pastor’s career trajectory. Unlike other managers, Pastor not only began as a lowly paid performer, but also continued to appear on stage with such entertainers well into his dotage. Perhaps it was Pastor’s fixed identity as a member of the laboring class that led other performers to continue to work alongside him at reduced wages during later years in which he found himself beset by financial problems.³⁷¹ In any case, Pastor maintained this interest and identification, birthed in the raucous urban environment of the Civil War years and confirmed throughout the financial panics of the late century, throughout his career. Indeed, Douglas Gilbert observes that Pastor’s energies ever sought out “the working man [and] the plight of labor, which after the [Civil] war became stirring issues....”³⁷² This working class population, imperiled by classist conscription policies and later embittered by post-bellum economic inequity, took voice in a city that, as Brooks McNamara has noted in his study of the concert saloon, “was becoming increasingly liberal and realistic in its point of view.”³⁷³

This growing realism naturally oriented Pastor’s gaze toward America’s burgeoning immigrant populations, the same groups that comprised a growing percentage of the working class and had just performed disproportionate service in the war. Were Pastor to seriously address issues of social and economic justice he could

³⁷⁰ For a thorough discussion of Pastor’s early days as a showman see Parker Zellers, *Tony Pastor: Dean of the Vaudeville Stage* (Ypsilanti: Eastern University Press, 1971) 2-31.

³⁷¹ “Tony Pastor Dead,” *New York Daily Tribune*, 27 Aug. 1908.

³⁷² Gilbert 107.

³⁷³ Brooks McNamara, *The New York Concert Saloon: The Devil’s Own Nights* (New York: Cambridge UP, 2002) 27.

not help but focus upon the role ethnicity played in one's survival. Antonio Pastor grew up awash in difference: his Italian-American heritage made him a relatively rarity in the Irish-dominated first wave of immigration that occurred prior to 1850. As well, his early career in minstrel shows, the circus, and variety troupes took him out of his native Brooklyn into the native-born and the ethnic audiences in New York City for whom he performed prior to managing his first theatre. Moreover, lodged within the combative audience dynamic of the variety hall, the showman appreciated that issues surrounding ethnicity involved not simply ossified stereotypes, but instead grappled with a host of economic, class, gender, and political matters.

Though Pastor, as songwriter/adaptor, scenarist, performer, and manager used various forms within variety well (e.g., comic monologues), it was in the afterpiece that he found his broadest canvas. Partly, the ability of the afterpiece to engage surrounding culture more fully lay in a longer running time. The pieces occupied anywhere from a quarter-hour to an hour. As well, the work served as the natural summation point for the evening. As the name would suggest, the afterpiece was the closing act on the stuffed, variegated bill that gamely struggled to hold the attention of notoriously finicky audiences.³⁷⁴ Such afterpieces, reliable wellsprings of ethnic humor, maintained a presence in Tony Pastor's theatres well into the 1880s, though their period of most reliable inclusion and greatest prominence on the bill ran from about 1865 to the late 1870s.³⁷⁵ Unlike the many variety sketches cribbed from successes on the legitimate stage or shopped in from freelance authors, Pastor's afterpieces were produced in an environment that placed all aspects of the theatrical

³⁷⁴ For an example of a complete variety bill please see Appendix A.

³⁷⁵ Though one must necessarily refer to Pastor's "theatres," it should be understood that his ownership of several houses was sequential in nature. A vigorous opponent of circuits such as that maintained by Keith-Albee Pastor remained the ultimate champion of localism throughout his career. He believed himself to be as intimately connected with each sole house as that theatre was its local habitat and accompanying audience. For further discussion of this issue see my chapter on variety/vaudeville and audience dynamics.

presentation under the guiding view of the hall's proprietor. Both performer and author himself, Pastor, the clown turned impresario, was famously involved with the minutiae of the bill, hiring performers, composing songs and editing others' scripts. Additionally, Pastor enabled purpose-written parts and casting by working with a small pool of writers and maintaining a stock company. In a world of variety performance best characterized by the itinerancy of its performers, Pastor thus managed to maintain a remarkable consistency of personnel within both his writing and performing pools, members of which adhered to and developed Pastor's own variety aesthetic. Pastor's sculpting touch was everywhere, as witnessed by the many changes scrawled in his own hand upon extant scripts.³⁷⁶ One is therefore afforded the rather rare opportunity of addressing the creations of various authors as a reflection of a central, guiding ethos.

Tony Pastor's afterpieces ran the gamut from excoriations on classism to puckish parodies of non-variety theatre. The presentations clung tightly, in most regards, to a world-view birthed in melodrama. Underscoring of emotions evaporated in the face of proclamation. The "appropriate" conclusion to the scenario arrived after steady navigation through a heavily plotted and well-trod course. Moreover, Pastor's perception of a justice denied his working class patrons guided his own particular aesthetic ideology. As often as he moved about the city and as tony as his later theatre locations could be considered in comparison to his first houses, Pastor's efforts in the variety halls read as sterling commendations of those who toiled during the day and populated his theatres at night. Part of this concern was simply the roots of Pastor's

³⁷⁶ Susan Kattwinkel, former cataloger of the Tony Pastor Collection at the University of Texas, Austin, suggests that all afterpieces from Pastor's theatres should be regarded as "Pastor's plays," regardless of their authorial provenance, as the manager came into ownership of the pieces following their submission. I shall also refer to the pieces in such manner, though I place less importance on legal ownership of the scenes than on his heavy involvement with both the design and final appearance of the text. Susan Kattwinkel, Introduction, *Tony Pastor Presents: Afterpieces From the Vaudeville Stage*, by Tony Pastor (Wesport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1998) 8.

keen interest in his audience giving flower to his stage works. If, as Susan Kattwinkel has noted, “the condition of the working class in New York City was an everyday concern for the majority of Pastor’s audience,” the staging of such issues proved a boon to the manager’s box office, as well as balm to the author’s soul.³⁷⁷ A rigid typology of characterizations inflected hard upon developing action: the Irish fought, the Italians attacked, and the English belittled. Almost always, the pieces addressed the intertwined issues of ethnicity and economic class before an audience largely comprised of working-class white spectators, though “gentlemen” from the upper economic classes also frequented such theatres. For Pastor, himself the child of Italian immigrants, non-Anglo ethnic characters usually represented those who hadn’t yet “got civilized,” to borrow a merrily scathing characterization from one of his hall’s afterpieces.³⁷⁸

Yet the non-Anglo characters, partly because of Pastor’s own sense of having evolved into a “sure ‘nuff” American from the child of immigrants, do not conform neatly to any single-faceted portrayal. As we shall see, ethnic characters in Pastor’s afterpieces possessed licensed abilities to interrogate and ridicule denied to native-born characters, making them ideal for a theatre of argument. Pastor was certainly aided by a ready-made audience for his wares in an American theatre community with a rich tradition of ethnic humor. The variety theatre, in particular, James Dormon has observed, was supported by “audiences whose appetite for [ethnic humor] proved insatiable.”³⁷⁹ Though ethnic humor certainly appeared throughout the variety bill, its greatest political efficacy naturally resided in the afterpiece. First, in comparison to the more free-wheeling exchanges between single acts and the highly interactive

³⁷⁷ Kattwinkel 3.

³⁷⁸ William Carleton, “Go West, or The Emigrant’s Palace Car,” Tony Pastor Collection, Harry Ransom Humanities Center, University of Texas, Austin.

³⁷⁹ James H. Dormon, “America Popular Culture and the New Immigration Ethnics: The Vaudeville Stage and the Presence of Ethnic Ascription,” *Amerika Studien*, vol. 35, #2 (Spring 1991): 180.

audiences, the afterpiece afforded Pastor a rare degree of authorial control. Next, its mid-nineteenth century emphasis on narrative-driven humor proved ideal as a form for political suasion. Indeed, as Christie Davis argues, the less narrative, more percussive joke that matured later in the century—what Albert McLean dryly terms variety humor’s “minimal structural unit”—proved far better at reiterating persuasive positions than articulating new ones.³⁸⁰ Within the variety afterpiece, then, Pastor combined his schooling in popular theatre, commitment to social justice and interest in ethnicity. He would use the form to promote, articulate, and then indict a standard ethnic American character type, laud elements of the ethnic self while decrying resistance to an American identity, and promote a radical acculturation over the more popular assimilation.

The roll of available American ethnic types remains fairly standard throughout variety afterpieces: Irish, German, English, African American and the native-born American exemplar, with less frequent appearances by Italian, Jew and Native American characters.³⁸¹ English characters appear as natural enemies to those of Irish extraction, as well as the inevitable butts during pieces set in the American Revolution. (The Anglo-conformity that would later guide vaudeville’s increase in respectability remained years away.) Native American characters, whose presence appears intended to demarcate not simply ethnic boundaries but appreciable limits of humanity itself for white audience members, appear infrequently but are inevitably

³⁸⁰ Christie Davies, *The Mirth of Nations* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2002) 202-204. Albert F. McLean, Jr., *American Vaudeville as Ritual* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1965) 112.

³⁸¹ Lacking photographs or any costume descriptions or plots directly tied to the afterpiece, one is unable to speak with any degree of specificity about the semiotics of visual characterization in the variety afterpiece. While one could draw reasonable inferences based on what we know about the usual habiliment of various ethnic types in other genres of performance, it is impossible to know how Pastor and his company played upon these characterizations through maintaining or changing elements such as hair, make-up, hats, accessories, etc. While one can assume that Irish characters frequently carried a shillelagh—partly because of non-afterpiece custom, partly because they are sometimes drawn into stage action—it is dangerous to assume that Pastor simply reiterated these various aspects over several decades and several different locations and audiences.

demonized as savages. Following the early nineteenth century influx of Irish, German, and English immigrants, such cast composition thus represented the bulk of second-wave immigration, and largely reflected the general Eastern urban populations of 1860-early 1880s. Scandinavians immigrated in increasing number during the two decades of variety's dominance—rising from roughly 25, 000 immigrants during the 1850s to nearly a quarter-million in the 1870s—but failed to gain prominence on the popular stage by settling most often in rural, non-Eastern areas. The notable absence of some ethnic types that would later populate vaudeville's stages, such as Slavs, arose naturally from their proportionally lower presence in Pastor's New York.³⁸²

Several matters become apparent when scanning Pastor's rota. First, the appearance of a particular ethnic type in variety's schema depends upon the familiar, rather than the exotic, ethnic Other. Those groups that, through their simple absence or proportional under-representation in the urban environment, failed to engage other peoples in frequent boundary creation and maintenance activities (e.g., congregating in certain neighborhoods, publishing a non-English language newspaper) did not find purchase on the stage. Second, the very existence of a regimented typology itself reifies the still-developing concept of ethnicity as a real and common currency. To speak of (much less enact) a "German" recognizable as such validated the differences birthed from different classes, religions, points of origin, etc. Third, the afterpieces in Tony Pastor's variety theatres constructed ethnicity as an absolute and authentic means of demarcation between the country's citizens, naturalizing and concretizing the arbitrary divisions based on cultural affinities and points of origin. It was possible therefore to speak with assurance about the "Irish," "English," or "German" as peoples separable from one another in meaningful fashions. As with the distinctions

³⁸²United States Immigration and Naturalization Service, *Annual Reports*, tabled in Dinnerstein and Reimers 19.

concerning “types” in the legitimate theatre (e.g., the heavy), these separations arose from the performances birthed of their correlative characteristics: Germans lacked a facility with language, the Irish were combative, and the upper-crust English evinced a foppish ineptness that drove them again and again over the brink of failure. Finally, stereotype and theatrical enactment existed in a powerfully reciprocal relationship in the variety theatre, one that resists a final attempt to establish either causality or primacy between them. While Pastor certainly developed his American ethnic types from preconceived notions of ethnic character, the popular ideations of such characters depended on mechanisms such as portrayal in variety afterpieces as “systems of action” devoted to their “societywide dissemination.”³⁸³

Relationships between ethnic types most often play out through the agency of a grand mission that enlists most of the American ethnic types in pursuit of a single goal. The American Revolution, this time fought by African Americans and Irish alongside the lionized Gen. Washington, remained an enduringly popular central plot throughout variety’s lifespan. Other storylines saw citizens completing the nation’s manifest destiny through continued westward migration, striking for an eight-hour work day or engaged in the familiar tortured romances of the period’s melodramas. Pastor was therefore willing to bring together groups that might be commonly segregated outside the theatre, but only in the pursuit of a mission so consuming and necessary that it demanded the violation of normal boundaries. Afterpieces also indulged both variety’s parodic nature and Pastor’s habit of making “original” pieces from others’ material in parodies of both popular successes from the contemporary legitimate stage (e.g., “Yeast Lynne”) and the classical theatre.³⁸⁴ Through these

³⁸³ Robin M. Williams, Jr., *Strangers Next Door: Ethnic Relations in American Communities* (Englewood-Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1964) 36.

³⁸⁴ Ethnic stock characters appeared far less frequently in parodies of classical work. Pastor’s “Richard III”, with a King Henry who has survived the Duke of Gloucester’s attack by placing a pie tin under his shirt, is typical in its cast of American exemplar characters. Despite his ringing disavowals of historical

central plots lace subplots (e.g., the comeuppance of a particular British officer) concerning small clusters of characters. Ethnic types often ally themselves with members from other groups during the pursuit of these sub-plots (Irish with African American being the most frequent pairing) or fully align themselves only with other members of their own ethnic groups. Few sub-plots incorporate a wide span of ethnicities.

Despite the rich larder of character types he afforded himself, Pastor usually maintained the journey of a native-born protagonist, the American exemplar, as the central concern of the developing action. This figure, without fail, locates his own ethnic identification outside of the foreign types and within the imagined native-born ethnicity from which, one assumes, deviate Dinnerstein and Reimer's ethnic "strains." As much a type as any of his fellows in the cast, American exemplars comport themselves to a fairly regimented and unvarying set of definitive characteristics. The exemplar is white, and native-born. He possesses a facility with language and mastery of social discourse that speaks to both his intelligence and comprehensive understanding of the cultural milieu in which he is placed. A sense of honor, defined on both the personal and cultural levels, directs most of his actions, leading into defiance of tyranny, rejection of improbity, and revelation of corruption. Though his speech and actions shift depending on his positioning as high-station or low-station, he is perpetually on the side of right. He is that ideal promontory against which the rest of the personages are dashed and found wanting.

As Werner Sollors so acutely demonstrates, major strains of American ethnic identification fall into two general categories. In the first, based on descent, the ethnic subject characterizes identity through an inheritance, be it cultural or genetic, of a

accuracy and verisimilitude Pastor displays marked reticence to insert American ethnic personages in such pieces.

given group's markers. In the second, framed by consent, volitional allegiance to a national identity becomes paramount over ethnic membership. For Sollors, it is an historical distinction between the "organic" and the "artificial" in the American conception of ethnicity.³⁸⁵ Because the American exemplar is neither aboriginal nor marked by any one European ethnic inflection, he would seem to loom as the suggested and fully staged ideogram of a white ethnic Other (e.g., Irish) following a process of successful acculturation. As such, however, he is most marked by an ethnic amnesia peculiar to his type: he has no ethnic past, and does not desire one.

Pastor's American exemplar, by his fixed position "beyond ethnicity" (to reorient Sollors's phrase), instead exists outside either of Sollors's models. The American exemplar silently understands the "history" of seemingly non-ethnic Americans to be a minefield of contradictions and problematic (if not fatal) revelations. Surrounded by Othered types whose ethnic markers have denied migration toward the non-ethnic realm of afterpiece protagonist, the American exemplar understands a self based on descent to be a passageway back to abjection and disempowerment. Highlighting the volitional nature of his "ethnic" identification, however, calls into conjecture the ethnic self that preceded his new national allegiance. This terrified rejection of both consent and descent, one that presents history as the deeply sublimated and yet omnipresent fear, itself mandates such erasure. Indeed, a lineage-based understanding of ethnicity ultimately forces the American exemplar back toward the very European roots sundered in the adoption of his new nation-centered ethnicity. The variety house discourse thus obscured points of origin for the American exemplar, insisting on an infinite historical collapse centered

³⁸⁵ Werner Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture* (New York: Oxford UP, 1986) 151.

on the American Revolution. (This, in part, accounts for the popularity of the American Revolutionary War as a subject for afterpiece plots.)

Constance Rourke, one of the proudest of the nation's early native cultural historians, simply obviates the need for such a moment, contending, "Americans are said to have had no childhood."³⁸⁶ Meticulous—if a bit fanciful—in tracing the roots of many American archetypes, Rourke founders when confronted with the Yankee, a character whose nascence precedes the country's political constitution. The Yankee type, traditionally traced to Royall Tyler's *The Contrast* (1787), demonstrates all the quirkiness of speech and cantankerousness of action that would be hallmarks of variety ethnic types. Flummoxed by a white, undeniably "ethnic" character influenced by and partially composed of various foreign models, Rourke simply surrenders herself to an uncertain provenance "that seems antediluvian."³⁸⁷ When she reaches back at all, Rourke invokes no pre-Revolutionary cultural source aside from the Puritan, that hoariest of non-threatening, Anglo-Conformist archetypes. (Notably, her discussion of minstrelsy finds no national black archetype worth mentioning until after the Revolutionary War.³⁸⁸) Writing in 1920, Samuel Orth allows that "ethnically, the only real Americans are the Indian descendents of the aboriginal races," but notes that "inevitably the people who came to have a preponderating influence in the new continent came to be called Americans," an acknowledgement of United States citizenship as a determinant factor. Neither of these distinctions serves Orth, whose work is entitled with the gratingly possessive *Our Foreigners*. Instead, he suggests that one must look beyond "mere citizenship" in a search for "the American stock."

³⁸⁶ Constance Rourke, *American Humor: A Study of the National Character* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1931) 8.

³⁸⁷ Rourke 8.

³⁸⁸ Rourke 77.

For, he observes, “there are millions of American citizens of foreign birth or parentage who, though they are Americans, are clearly not of any American stock.”³⁸⁹

Pastor’s American exemplar, then, is like Pastor himself: defying attempts to plunge past his proudly nationalistic bent through sternly denying any authentic existence at the hyphenated border of ethnicized American identity. Pastor was an Italian American who crafted the bulk of his European afterpiece scenari around the Irish struggle against English oppression.³⁹⁰ He reached greater early success in blackface than through his natural countenance. As a manager, he most strongly identified with an event, the American Revolution, that had pre-dated his own family’s arrival in the country and which celebrated the defeat of a colonial power whose oppression his ancestors had never known. In short, Pastor’s American exemplar, like Pastor himself, depended upon an amnesia so profound that he existed without the foundation, framework, or barest patina of an “ethnic” identity whatsoever.

The perennial flower of Orth’s elusive “American stock,” the American exemplar therefore demonstrates his cultural capital only when set in relief against Othered ethnicities, be they “savage Indians,” “drunken Irishman” or “crafty Jews.” Displaying a morphological understanding of ethnic groupings, the discourse of ethnicity within the variety hall thus circumscribed its own identity boundaries only through the presence of Othered ethnicities and the articulation of their correlative characteristics. Through such means one arrives at an American exemplar, to once again borrow from Sollor’s phraseology, “characterized by negative catalogs:” a “real” American is not deceitful, not greedy, not needlessly quarrelsome, not savage, etc.³⁹¹ This process of description through inferred inversion accounts for the popular

³⁸⁹ Samuel P. Orth, *Our Foreigners: A Chronicle of Americans in the Making* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1920) 22.

³⁹⁰ In part, this was a nod to the box office. Far more Irish Americans existed in the period of variety’s flourishing.

³⁹¹ Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity* 7.

notion that the American exemplar represents the sole “non-ethnic” character in the period’s popular theatre, especially when he is set against such readily identifiable white American types as the Yankee. (This phenomenon appears particularly acute when one begins to calculate precisely how many other ethnic types must appear alongside an American exemplar in a nineteenth-century American play before it may be considered “ethnic theatre.”) Yet this ethnic amnesia within the variety afterpiece serves a necessary function for a theatre dedicated, in part, to the further acculturation of its audience members from Othered ethnic groups. The erasure of history present in the American exemplar’s identity perversely suggests a history malleable to its subjects, and posits a hegemony that might become more responsive to the underclasses should they will their inclusion in it.

In part, the uncertainty of the American exemplar’s origin also constituted a tactical move, though perhaps an unconscious one, on the part of the variety hall playwrights. As Rourke’s ready accession to a gauzy historical view indicates, danger lay ahead for those who would look behind. All such backwards glances, after all, troubled the critical assumption that provided both the American exemplar type and the rationale for acculturation: namely, that this national archetype was itself beyond lineage, both timeless and unfettered by lingering foreign allegiances. To suggest otherwise would call into question the very existence of an “American” separable from the contaminating influences of other shores, tongues, and customs. More than anything, the American exemplar, not graced by the canny wiles, spirited temperament, or guileless authenticity of other variety ethnic types, enacted the national trope of liberty. Within the national discourse of nineteenth century America, lip service to this unshackled self became the loudening cant justifying actions ranging from seizing of Native American lands to the founding of commercial trusts. Indeed, the maniacal belief in universal self-betterment that fueled industrial capitalism—

rising from go-getting telegraph messenger boy to despotic president of U.S. Steel—depended, in part, upon an invention of an ancestor-less self. So extreme was this tendency that one etiquette maven in the 1880s sighed that the instilling of social graces still had no historical foundation after two centuries of European settlement in North America. Americans, she found, lacked one thing: a grandfather.³⁹² Yet it was this very capacity to resist ownership by one's past that allowed one American exemplar to frame his country as the place where "shouts of Liberty daily arise"³⁹³

Indeed, even tracing back to English roots, seemingly less threatening than the more virulently disparaged ethnic types, proved beyond the pale for the American exemplar. When challenged to identify himself by an English type, one American character, hearkening to the tall tales that populated the century's national folklore, will allow only that he "was born in a balloon during a hailstorm."³⁹⁴ The prevalence of afterpieces devoted to the American Revolution also points to a need to separate the American exemplar from any affiliation to the nation from which the "national language" was inherited. Such playlets often include "traitorous" Americans who, having forgotten to forget, foolishly choose to fight for the British. In these sketches a facility with the English language, now the ancestral yet uninherited property of the Americans, often lies beyond their fumbling grasp; speech impediments abound. One such viper in the bosom of his colonial home fruitlessly attempts to understand why his personal allegiance to England appears to put him so ill at ease. In acknowledging an ancestral debt to the king, he experiences "a sort of a-- a wevolution in the wegion of my heart. I wondaw if I've got a heart."³⁹⁵ The American exemplar therefore

³⁹² Mary E. W. Sherwood qtd. in Arthur M. Schlesinger, *Learning to Behave: A Historical Study of American Etiquette Books* (New York: MacMillan Co., 1947) 28.

³⁹³ Carelton 17.

³⁹⁴ "Bunker Hill, or The First Shot for Freedom," Tony Pastor Collection, Harry Ransom Humanities Center, University of Texas, Austin: 9.

³⁹⁵ "Bunker Hill, or The First Shot for Freedom" 21.

enforced a renunciation of *all* foreign cultural and national affinities, regardless of hue of skin or language of discourse. Indeed, as Lawrence Levine notes, nineteenth century American popular culture's own "wevolution" targeted nothing so much as "Old World pretensions."³⁹⁶

Economic station and degree of social mobility could vary wildly between American exemplars. Indeed, Pastor largely excluded personal capital or station at birth from consideration within this ethnic identification, locating the core of the American exemplar, as with other types, in actions birthed of correlative characteristics. For the American exemplar this continued to be the espousal of bromides. Tom Spring, the young mechanic protagonist of Pastor's own "Mechanic's Strike, or The Eight Hour System," finds a voice as strident in its enunciation of right as George Washington's, though his concerns root themselves in the struggle of his class. Introducing himself to fellow working class members Teddy Toole and Peter Baum he announces

My name is Tom Spring. I'm a New York boy by birth, a mechanic by profession, and a brick layer by occupation. I go in for Liberty, Justice, Union and equal rights, eight hours a day and no shirking and I don't care a damn who knows it.³⁹⁷

Richard Thurston, the American exemplar protagonist of Charles Seabert's "A Miner's Life, or The Poor Man's Home," would seem an unlikely choice to serve as exemplar for the immigrant audience. He is a poor man, trapped in the mining job he loathes and married to Jenny, his former charge, whom he loves and who does not love him in return. Yet Richard soldiers on, displaying the admirable characteristics

³⁹⁶ Lawrence Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1988) 94.

³⁹⁷ Tony Pastor, "Mechanic's Strike, or The Eight Hour System," 6.

Pastor demands in the American exemplar. His farewell to his wife before work plays out with all the passion one comes to expect from his ethnic type:

Richard: Ah, Jenny my girl. (Kisses her) I thought I would come -- as is usual with me -- and kiss you before going to work, for you know, Jenny, there is no telling what may happen before night. But what is the matter with you? You look sad.

Jenny: No, no. I was only thinking of the dangers and hardships you have to endure to keep soul and body together.

Richard: Never mind that, Jenny. I think only of our happy home, and the comforts, and pleasures we enjoy after my day's work is done. The thoughts of your smiling face, and our cheerful fire side, repays me for all the dangers I incur hundreds of feet below the surface of the earth.

The example from "A Miner's Life" demonstrates the oddly incapacitating nature of the American exemplar's (non)ethnicity. Pastor's vision of an active nation ultimately indicts the fitness of the American exemplar. Whereas the correlative characteristics assigned to Othered ethnic types impugn their more ephemeral dignity and worthiness for social esteem, the characteristics ascribed to American exemplars made the latter type less capable of the muscular brand of citizenship demanded in Pastor's America. As Donald Hall has argued of the muscular Christianity whose epoch was nearly coterminous with that of variety, Pastor's muscular citizenship was shot through with a "stoic patience."³⁹⁸ The American exemplar characters in these afterpieces do not seem to invigorate the various actions so much as confront them with a studied, if "honorable," blandness. American exemplars are cast adrift in environments of calculation, deceit and intrigue, venues in which their much-lauded

³⁹⁸ Hall is discussing the arguments of Charles Kingsley, progenitor of the modern movement. Donald E. Hall, *Muscular Christianity: Embodying the Victorian Age* (Cambridge UP, New York, 2006) 19.

decency and forthrightness incapacitate them in resolving the many crises. In the end, Pastor argues, the American exemplar, that amnesiac “non-ethnic” heir to the great promise of a lost history, is impotent to effectively act in a world that assumes him to be master. Action itself—often violent, impetuous, corporeal, and emotional—is defined within Pastor’s world as a heavily ethnic activity. As soon as the American exemplar demonstrates the combativeness and physical frenzy demanded of many of the scenari, he abandons his station beyond ethnicity.³⁹⁹

The construction of the American exemplar in Pastor’s afterpieces comes more fully into light when one considers that the period of its greatest popularity (1860-1880) immediately preceded the Americanization of British muscular Christianity in the early 1880s. Pastor’s exemplar is a being split between his body and civic spirit. The inclination towards decency, forthrightness, and honor have created a psyche that seems to rein in independent physical action at every turn. His unwillingness or inability to meaningfully engage in physical violence (or its verbal equivalent, ridiculing and berating) at moments of greatest peril genders him as a profoundly ineffective party in the stewardship of the nation. When Harry Miller, the apparent hero (though by no means the protagonist) of “Bunker Hill” attempts to comfort Mary, his beloved, he appears resigned to his own ultimately pointless death in an upcoming Revolutionary War battle. “Our numbers are weak, our men poorly clad, but half

³⁹⁹ This predilection toward ineffectiveness also marks the exemplar as distinct from other native-born white male types within the afterpiece. Versions of the Yankee character, popularized as “Jonathan” in scores of antebellum pieces, as well as more sluggish rubes continued to appear in Pastor’s variety afterpieces. They were, however, distinct types from the exemplar. The latter was more often the punch line for the jokes than the teller, a position of social abjection within the world of the play. The former was excluded from idealization by his violent tendencies and inclination to wax pugnaciously about his enemies. A classic example of this “crusty American” may be found in the character Hiram Cartwright in “Bunker Hill.” Shortly after crowing that his real name is “Everlasting Thunderbolt,” Hiram confronts a lisping English officer with a bit of Yankee boasting that would not have seemed out of place on the American stage in the 1830s: “I was born in a balloon during a hail storm. I was brought up on wild cats and rattlesnakes. I can chaw up a lightning rod and wash it down with aqua fortis. And as for fighting, I’m the most peaceable critter you ever saw. I never hit a man twice. I always kill him first time.” “Bunker Hill, or The First Shot for Freedom,” Tony Pastor Collection, Harry Ransom Humanities Center, University of Texas, Austin: 9.

armed, undisciplined,” Miller admits, “while the enemy are daily receiving reinforcements of veteran troops.” “The one amour” the soon-to-perish Americans have, he states, is “the knowledge of a good cause.”⁴⁰⁰ As well, the studied stoicism that Pastor so lauded in figures such as George Washington became, by the 1870s, a force that also genders the exemplar as feminine Other in the world of the afterpiece. Like the liberal nineteenth century New England clergymen analyzed by Ann Douglas, the exemplars “often appeared the laggards, hesitant promulgators of feminine virtue in an era of militant masculinity....”⁴⁰¹ Finding that cultural figures such as Douglas’ ministers and women organizing with Protestant churches had corrupted formerly vigorous aspects of American culture, advocates of muscular Christianity, disturbed by the “unmanly” laxity represented in figures such as Pastor’s exemplar, sought to re-fuse the Manichean divide that had occurred between the active, healthy “manly” body and the well-intentioned, but ultimately weak and corrupt “feminized” civic and religious spirit.⁴⁰²

The sound spirit possessed by the American exemplar, in Pastor’s rendering, may therefore be understood as an incomplete figure within the afterpiece, one dependent upon other ethnic types for the muscular forms of corrective action that help bring redress to an unjust society. We should understand Pastor’s exemplar as a figure in-between epochs of American identity—the visceral Jacksonian force of the

⁴⁰⁰ “Bunker Hill” 11.

⁴⁰¹ Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1998) 53.

⁴⁰² Clifford Putney writes that muscular Christianity is best understood as a “male reaction against women’s religious leadership.” He argues that the lag of several decades between Great Britain’s and America’s full adoption of muscular Christianity (1850s as opposed to the 1890s) arose because, although “the strength of that leadership undoubtedly irritated some men,” that same organizing feminine force served to “retard” the growth of the opposing movement. Putney’s too-ready imagining of this supposed irritation papers over the roles capital and economic class played in Protestant organization during the late nineteenth-century. He mistakes, I believe the tendency of the era to feminize the abject for an inclination to abject the feminine. See in particular pp. 73-98 for his full argument. Clifford Putney, *Muscular Christianity: Manhood and Sports in Protestant America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2003) 3.

antebellum period and the healthy body/educated mind of Progressivism—and the worse for this betwixtness. Unlike the earlier Yankee character, Pastor's white protagonist, being often unable to will and engage in decisive action, is not really a protagonist at all, but rather exists as a noble but ultimately impotent figure. Greater education and culture have enfeebled him. Unlike the earlier Yankee character, he was not succored on "wild cats and rattlesnakes," nor does he proclaim, as does "Bunker Hill's" Cartwright, "There ain't a regiment big enough for me. I'm a whole army in myself." Rather, he gives voice to aspirational sentiments about the nation which he proves unable to enforce or bring into being. Though he is the noble, white, male character in an epoch that frequently forbade all others from leadership positions, he is nonetheless a figure of disdain in the active hullabaloo of the afterpiece.

J.C. Stewart's "The Happy Family," an afterpiece that played in Pastor's theatre sometime in the 1870s, takes Pastor's figure to his most ineffective extension. The aptly named Mr. Meekly, the central male figure of the piece, holds true to the higher ideals of the exemplar figure. He believes in the sacred power of the American family, considers his duty as a husband to supercede any personal inclinations he might have, and against all evidence to the contrary, holds that his wife must be a paragon of genteel American womanhood. Jake, Mr. Meekly's African American footman, claims to his employer that Mrs. Meekly, whom he has known since childhood, instead possesses a much more expressive temperament in youth and is now given to fits of violent pique when her husband is not present. In due course, Mr. Meekly, testing his wife's temperament, is faced with an unexpected force within his house: Mrs. Meekly turns upon him with a horsewhip and begins beating him about the stage. Seeking to avoid further enmity, Mr. Meekly acquiesces to series of increasingly belittling demands (e.g., standing on his head) rather than confront his

abuser.⁴⁰³ Only when Jake, similarly abused by his own wife, gets Mr. Meekly drunk does he find any avenue for confrontation. The state of inebriation frees Mr. Meekly of obeisance to the grander tropes which he had formerly supported. Instead, temporarily relieved of the crippling station of exemplar, he turns upon his wife with the same whip. Finally, as sobriety descends upon him and he and Jake are separated in their skullduggery, Mr. Meekly returns to his former platitudinous state. Rather than fight, the restored exemplar announces to his enraged (and one imagines, revenge-minded) spouse, they should simply do what husband and wife do: get along “like turtle doves.”⁴⁰⁴

When Mr. Meekly’s natural character rules the piece and its house, it is implied, both lack satisfying order at all. Mrs. Meekly, who appears to be a variation of one of variety’s “fire and whiskey” working class Irish women, must tamp down her lifelong dissatisfaction with successive roles as daughter, wife, and mother in order to maintain the façade of the home. So as not to perturb the ennobled inactivity of her husband, she is forced to operate in the “stealth” that Douglas finds an inherent condition to those women suspended in the muteness of unfulfilling domestic encumbrance. She is far from the shrew archetype so common to the period’s popular theatre (and, one should note, nearly every era’s popular theatre). Instead, we may view her as an individual whose natural proclivity towards expression and demonstration (remember Jake’s revelation about her childhood) has reached an explosive order of magnitude precisely because of her husband’s inability to engage discord in any fashion.

Because of Mr. Meekly’s merry insistence at honor *uber alles*—and honor that

⁴⁰³ Because Jake, an African American, begins the afterpiece in a lower social position than his employer, mistreatment from his own wife plummets him to a requisitely lower position than that occupied by the henpecked Mr. Meekly. Rather than perform feats of simple physical humiliation, Jake is condemned to play out his denigration as an animal (e.g., crowing like a rooster, barking like a dog, etc.). J.C. Stewart, “The Happy Family,” Tony Pastor Collection, Harry Ransom Humanities Center, University of Texas, Austin.

⁴⁰⁴ Stewart, “The Happy Family.”

precludes his wife from even having certain inclinations—she can be who she is only when he is not present. Over time, this bottle has placed her under seismic pressure: Jake tells us her natural expressiveness has grown into violence only after her marriage, and never when her husband is in the room. Mr. Meekly himself spends the first part of the piece in benumbed ignorance of his own state, mouthing maxims about the bliss of a domestic life that he has yet to truly experience. Moreover, he is able to engage with his wife's temperament only when a low ethnic Other has laid out a plan for him and enticed him into a state of drunken abandonment of self. When he returns to his natural state, the exemplar has learned nothing and forgotten everything, unsurprising as the exemplar character demands an ignorance in the face of life-world conditions that contradict his social dogma.

The variety afterpiece, then, establishes a problematic vision of the nation: an America guided by the mouthed platitudes of the exemplar but driven and maintained by the actions of the various non-exemplar ethnic types. In part, this reflects the variety hall's understanding of class-based decorum vis-à-vis ethnicity. For Pastor and his fellow afterpiece writers, full investiture in the position of American exemplar allowed even the poorest mine worker to act with the gentility of those in "proper society." Continued display of lower class markers (e.g., brawling, chicanery, and insolence) seems to have signaled to the audience that a nominally American character still maintained a telling foothold on foreign shores. Mr. Meekly's confrontation is also the surrender to a more violent and canny ethnic Other. In a sense, Pastor and his writers, caught betwixt periods of theatrical archetypes have neatly solved the problem that lay at the heart of the collision between inherited character types and a rising interest in socio-economic redress. While the American exemplar lacked the natural inclination toward the furious activity that would liberate "the lower ten thousand," Pastor ameliorated this by placing him in continual proximity to and alliance with

ethnic Others. In so doing, the unimpeachably white exemplar—a notable state of purity at a time when many native born Americans did not consider Irish immigrants white—found himself beholden to other ethnic types for redemptive, effective action.

In many ways, Pastor's formulation of the exemplar reflected the silent verities of modern industrial capitalism in the late nineteenth century. Industrial capital seeks to consolidate in the most economic fashion possible: the greatest number and amount of resources should coalesce around centralized power through the least amount of effort expended by that receiving agent. Otherwise, the effort expended by the hegemony to gather and concretize implements of power begins to dilute the gains enjoyed by its possession and implementation. One may best understand Pastor's exemplar as a force around which power attempts to coalesce (e.g., he is the head of a family, a leader of a labor movement) but whose honorable passivity too often fails to organize and maintain society with the rigidity and fierce allegiance to action that would be demanded by Progressives in the coming decades.

Indeed, Pastor, who fought his way up in his profession with unmatched vigor and dedication, appears to understand that the "ideal" American hero at the fore of many of the pieces has been so stripped of any rough edges and contradictory qualities that he is unable to effect personal or social progress. The exemplar maintains all the honor and nobility of Pastor's beau ideal of the national character, George Washington, but lacks any means to bring the social manifestations of these ideals into existence. The exemplar is qualities with no capabilities, a death blow in the roiling, knock-about world of the variety stage. In essence, the character functions as Pastor's thorough critique of what later Progressives would trumpet as Americanization, an ideology that called for the loss of non-Anglo ethnic markers (e.g., language, dress, deportment, customs) in the service of fuller inclusion into urban society. The figure has indeed surrendered any previous ethnic markers in his adoption of the nobler

character traits of the American exemplar. Yet in the afterpiece he also lacks any compensating inclinations toward effective action. For Pastor, whose early career was driven by a sense of class conflict and economic injustice, the nature of “performance” as an American, be it on or off stage, lay in one’s ability to not simply “get ahead” but to alter the surrounding world in the wake of such action. Pastor’s world inherently involves opposition and conflict that creates transformative possibilities to the oppressed class. Pastor’s incapable Americanized figure, bereft of any capacity to change the unjust world about him, stands as an argument for an acculturation model of immigration, one that collusively integrated various populations together in a *mélange* of traditions, approaches, languages, and inclinations. If the exemplar structurally functions as the hero in most of the extant afterpieces, he is also one who blandness and lack of Otherness—a frequent modern critique of Progressive Americanization drives—condemns him to dependence upon those who have acculturated without fully surrendering their pre-American selves.

Initially, Pastor’s afterpieces frame ethnic Others in a fashion as manifestly unattractive for its lack of proportion and rectitude as the American exemplar becomes through his ineffective bromides. In opposition to the American exemplar’s innate and self-aware reach toward a higher moral and spiritual plane, ethnic Others display a gross sense of ethnic embodiment, appearing more as captives of their corporeal forms than masters. “The Steerage, or Life in the Briny Deep” takes its stock cast of European immigrants through a troublesome trans-Atlantic crossing to the new world.⁴⁰⁵ Like their Rabelaisian counterparts, the personas of these immigrants seat themselves deeply within sating of physical needs and interest in bodies as loci of social performance. A storm-tossed meal places the American exemplar captain and

⁴⁰⁵ The piece is not dated, but the presence of an Italian immigrant character and fashion of the manuscript’s construction appear to point to a later date of performance. “The Steerage, or Life in the Briny Deep,” Tony Pastor Collection, Harry Ransom Humanities Center, University of Texas, Austin.

first mate in foul moods but ravages the bodies of the immigrant population. Herman Himmelspink, “a migrating Dutchman with no sense of the briny deep,” is first attacked by the African American scullery cook—his eye blackened and face covered with mush—and then thrown by the inclement weather into torrents of regurgitation.⁴⁰⁶ Upon returning to his meal he finds that the six children of an anonymous Irish passenger—from the cast list we know only that she is “prolific in her propensity to add to the earth's population”—have scurried from their cots to devour any food remaining on the table. Hans, purged of his previous meal but ever-ready for purposeless consumption, advances on the children, crying, “Look at dem! Look at dem! I wants mein grub!” Rounding on him, the Irish mother wishes “musha bad look” to the “olwd Dutch thief,” and flattens him with a broom. Suddenly, across a ship littered with fighting tots, semi-conscious victims of violence and nausea, broom-wielding mothers and off-stage vomit flees a Frenchman. “Sacre bleu! Sacre bleu! Wis ze smell of ze Irish, and ze Dutch, I'm almost suffocate.” The bodies of these hyper-ethnicized characters thus stage ethnicity as noisome contaminant on the journey to America. The ethnic form produces children beyond its society's capacity to provide care, offends with its noisome stench and greedily consumes others' resources. The ship, whose assemblage of varied ethnicities fairly represents many urban centers on the American Eastern seaboard, finds only corrosion of its social fiber through the Othered ethnicities' inability to govern their physical sites.

Variety afterpieces similarly indict temperaments of ethnic Others. William Carelton's “Go West, or The Emigrant Palace Car” focuses on a boatload of immigrants newly arrived in America. Meeting the boat is Harry Hawkeye, a British detective, who has been warned that a murderer on board may be identified by his luggage, which bears the initials “H.M.” Both Hans Munchausen (husband of

⁴⁰⁶ Germans are frequently referred to as “Dutch,” thought to be a bastardization of *Deutsch*.

Katerina and a German immigrant) and Heffernan Mulvany (husband of Bridget and an Irish immigrant) are stopped while disembarking; a frenzy of pratfalls and luggage confusion ensues. The real murderer, Ignacio Flipperini Cespedes, an Italian, gets away, disguises himself as a different Italian, and makes his way to the train station to escape to the West. His mistreated and angered wife, Miss Slipshod, has followed him and pretends to help him, though she tips off Harry who, accompanied by his friend Ben, an American ex-policeman, also gets on board the Western bound train. The other immigrants accompany them. The train ride itself becomes a staging opportunity to allow different cast members to duck offstage, switch into new characters, come back on and perform a specialty act, and exit (usually by being thrown out of the train window). After introducing a corrupt evangelical preacher, two Negroes, a poverty stricken Irishman, a member of a traveling H.M.S. Pinafore Co., a rough and tumble Westerner, and a Yankee dry goods merchant, the scenarist suddenly surrounds the train with an Indian attack. The Indian chief enters the car, performs a song, and then is overcome by the magically appearing U.S. Army. Whereas American exemplar characters collect themselves before leaping toward their infrequent physical violence, often pausing to deliver studied final proclamations to angered foes, ethnic Others erupt into aggression as their most immediate means of curing social unrest, a trait most evident in the variety theatre's construction of the Irish. Even when sober, the variety theatre Irishman understands all cultural conflict only through the lens of aggression. Heffernan Mulraney, an Irish immigrant in "Go West," spends an infrequent moment of peace describing to his countrywoman, Bridget, and the piece's American exemplar, Ben, his ambition to "clear the Western [sic] Wilds" by planting every Native American who stands in his way underground; it

will, he assures his listeners, be a fine crop of Indian corn.”⁴⁰⁷

If the Irish types, with their ceaseless overpopulation by “seed, breed, and giniration” (to use one of Bridget’s phrases) and unrepentant recourse to violence and drink, represented a vision of the most immediately destructive ethnic Other, the German type displayed the abject in its most manifest bewilderedness when encountering native American culture. The German’s verbal incompetence incapacitated him during attempts to interact with both American exemplar and his fellow ethnic Others. Constantly preyed upon by swindlers, he is a poor businessman and worse gambler. Though he often consumes alcohol in as great a quantity as the Irish does whisky, he appears less conscious of his consumption than are the McGradies and Driscolls of the variety roll. The Irishman wields both word and whiskey as tools for social disruption; the German falls prey to language and “lager bier.” Because his spirit may be judged as less prone to violence than that of the Irishman, the German often appears especially poor at defending his hard-won place in American society.

Charles F. Seabert, one of Pastor’s authors, brings the two ethnic types into open combat in “The Tenth Ward by Day and Night.” The good-hearted Charley is desperately seeking employment so that he may feed his ailing mother and devoted sister, Alice, who has left or been fired from the employ of the evil Mr. Grasp. Charley wanders upon Pete, an African American, who invites him to join him for a beer in the local bar. Charley does not drink, of course, but nevertheless accompanies Pete into the tavern. In the establishment are Grasp and his henchman, Bill. Already outraged that a “nigger” is sitting in the bar with proper gentlemen, Grasp is infuriated when the German Fritz enters and offers to buy him a drink. During this time, the

⁴⁰⁷ William Carleton, “Go West, or The Emigrant’s Palace Car,” Tony Pastor Collection, Harry Ransom Humanities Center, University of Texas, Austin.

Irish Pat attempts to scam bar patrons by feigning an injury and begging for funds; he is exposed by Pete. Grasp, who is in love with Alice has plans to kidnap her. In an attempt to prevent Charley from aiding his sister, Grasp accuses Charley of stealing his pocket-book to a policeman. Pete and Fritz overpower the officer, freeing Charley. Later, Fritz and Bridget, Pat's wife, both peddlers, tussle over who can work the same piece of land. They fight, with Bridget beating him. Grasp then abducts Alice from her house but is confronted by Charley, who launches into a diatribe against the wealthy and reclaims Alice. As the two start to leave, Grasp raises a gun to shoot Charley in the back of the head, only to be surprised by Fritz and Pete with guns at his head. They lead him off stage with pistols to his temples, though we later discover that Grasp punches Pete and escapes. The scene then shifts to a gambling den where Fritz beats Bill badly in a game of "Seven Up" but then drops his wallet, losing all of his money. Grasp enters and attempts to gin up a fight with Fritz; he and Bill draw on the immigrant. Suddenly, three of the gamblers reveal themselves as policemen and draw their own guns. Grasp flees but is caught in the street and taken away by the policemen for suspicion of robbery in the seventh ward. Charley reveals that he has found steady work. It ends with a dance.

In his surprisingly deft examination of the working class, Seabert joins peddlers Fritz Mucklewater, "a valiant Dutchman," and Bridget Carpenter, an Irish immigrant, in battle over a prime spot on the street. Though the latter half of the piece demonstrates Fritz to be an able enough combatant, here Bridget beats the German soundly and takes the location.⁴⁰⁸ Such exchanges between successfully aggressive ethnic women and incompetently combative ethnic men highlight the thinly veiled imposition of a patriarchal, heavily gendered framework upon the relations of Othered

⁴⁰⁸ Charles F. Seabert, "The Tenth Ward by Day and Night," Tony Pastor Collection, Harry Ransom Humanities Center, University of Texas, Austin.

ethnicities. Ethnic women in the variety afterpiece appreciate their continued triumph in physical contest as a particular breed of masculinization, one often highlighted by the presence of a “properly” feminine, hopelessly fragile American exemplar woman.

Susan Purdie, though cognizant that even in using the term “mastery” in relation to discourse ratifies patriarchy, finally endorses at least “a generalizing view of the pattern which conflates whatever is called ‘masculine’ with valuations of legitimate and competent authority while the opposing label ‘feminine’ constructs a lack of institutional and/or essential power.”⁴⁰⁹ Female ethnic characters, for Pastor, gained worth through their utility, even though such utility masculinized them within the world of the afterpiece. As the variety stage demanded a decision between agency and femininity, the price for characters such as Bridget was surrendering any socio-cultural acknowledgement of qualities that the variety stage assumed hyper-feminine women bore in their wake: docility, respectability, fashion, and public decorum.

Such eruptions of masculinized force fed the afterpiece’s frequent relapses into violence as a means to counteract the advantages enjoyed by wealthier characters. Christie Davis, in her study of ethnic humor, argues for an understanding in humor studies of the continued importance of masculine violence as a tool for stratifying actors within each culture. Locating a concomitant aggrandizement of “aggressive male roles” that feeds directly into capitalism’s continued embrace of “a belief in the virtue and utility of crude size, strength and violence,” Davis persuasively argues that industrial societies take great care in their humor even to create “foods of weakness” (e.g., porridge) through joking.⁴¹⁰ The combat between Fritz and Bridget thus denigrates the ethnic types in two fashions. The ethnic woman finds herself understood in native-born American culture as a body warring with itself: an

⁴⁰⁹ Susan Purdie, *Comedy: The Mastery of Discourse* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993) 7-8

⁴¹⁰ See especially Chapter Nine, “Eating, Ethnicity and Humor.” Christie Davies, *Ethnic Humor Around the World: A Comparative Analysis* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1990) 285.

ascriptive and socially conditioned disposition to violence brings her closer to a full embodiment of her ethnicity; physical aggression indicates failure within her female role. Conversely, as the hierarchy of aggressiveness relating Othered cultures to one another mandates that “even” a woman of Irish descent will invariably defeat the constitutionally less hostile German man, Fritz finds himself emasculated in a world Pastor understands as unforgiving toward such failure.⁴¹¹

Such hierarchical arrangement of the Othered ethnicities suggested those ethnic groups with most power were also those who most clearly resembled the American exemplar archetype, thus encouraging adoption of a new national (read: ethnic) identity on the part of ethnic Others. Though all non-American exemplar ethnicities (e.g., Irish, German) fail to grasp native culture in some respect the greatest ridicule on the variety stage was saved for those whose failures of in-group cultural fluency, rather than temperament, dictated their choices. The Irish may leap too quickly into the fray, but as we see in Mulraney’s plan to sow the frontier with Native Americans, they maintained a high degree of self-awareness during the commission of unsuccessful cultural acts. The German (and later the Italian), however, stumbled into unsuccessful actions and remained terribly immune to any force of cultural education through experience. In “Don’t Give de Name a Bad Blace [sic]” (1871), Gus Williams’ variety house comic song, a German character outlines his life running a new saloon in America. After relating his failures at various gambling games (“Eucherem, “Seven Oud” and “Dominexes”) he confesses that “poger,” more than anything, will prove his downfall:

Yes, dats de game I don't understand. You see I vas blaying "Poger" de oder day, und vas bedding all my money because I had a goot hand, und ven de oder

⁴¹¹ For a fuller discussion of gender and the variety theatre please see the first chapter of this dissertation.

fellar asked vat I had, I tole him dat I had four aces, and vat you dink? Dat oder fellar had five aces, und I losed my money. Dat's de first dime dat ever knew dat dere vas nine aces in a deck of cards, und I felt so mad about it, dat I vas going to fight....⁴¹²

Unlike his Irish counterpart, the German does not even fight for the correct reason: he swings to vent frustration but remains oblivious to the swindle throughout the song. Before the first punch, however, his wife “hollered oud” that a fight might “give de name a bad place” and “de bolices vill gwick arrested you.” His wife’s public contradiction compounds the desiccation of the German’s social power. As Purdie has noted, such humor

use[s] signifiers which construct [women] as attached to male partners: girlfriends, wives and mother-in-laws. In most of these, the “inept Butt” is actually that male who cannot control his woman properly, typically, in her . . . taking power. . . . The Male figure is consequently degraded from his position as a proper man. Thus men who fail to control women are comic objects....⁴¹³

Such acquiescence to female intervention thus marks figures such as the variety German male character as the abject feminine Other within an ethnic discourse partly understood as a patriarchal hierarchy. This iteration of differential and stratified valuation between the Othered ethnicities again frames the question of acculturation as one of willed success within a dangerously judgmental new society. The utility of ethnic Others in American society imagined by those who preceded them unconsciously depended upon two elements. First, members of the ethnic in-group producing the cultural construction framed the ethnic Other as abject so that it might sequester affected populations in a state of social, economic, and cultural quarantine.

⁴¹² Gus Williams, “Don’t Give de Name a Bad Blace,” *Since the Soup House Moved Away* (New York: A.J. Fisher, 1874).

⁴¹³ Purdie 134-135

This element justified, among other phenomena, ignoring fire codes in packed Five Points dwellings, the existence of tenements in violation of building codes, exclusion from organized labor, and abuse of child laborers. It would not be until the reforms of Progressivism (e.g., settlement houses, modern sanitation in poorer areas, unadulterated foodstuffs) that these populations would more fully enter into the protections (and dislocations) of modern American society.⁴¹⁴ Second, the utility of this ethnic Other frequently demanded a hypermasculinized aggressiveness appropriate for the level of violence created by the exemplar's exclusion from such duties. In part, Irish characters fought more within the variety afterpiece because such cultural representation justified the decision to send recently arrived Irish immigrants to Civil War combat in disproportionate numbers. The limning of the immigrant as a "beast without a soul" further explained their declension into simple roles of unrelenting physical labor. Often nothing more than bodies, they could be used for this corporeal existence alone. Alcohol, which kept these characters in a state of perpetual thralldom to violence and impulsiveness, became a frequent corollary to this place of Otherness. Ethnic women were rarely framed as objects of male sexual desire on the variety stage, existing instead as (fe)male adjuncts whose aggression and lack of self-control matched that of male members of their populations. Ethnic Others,

⁴¹⁴ Though it lies beyond the scope of this project, one must note that this abjection inflicted with particular harshness upon two populations in the North, where variety flourished: African Americans and women. The former population, alone among the nineteenth-century ethnic Others in not finding solid progress toward fuller inclusion in native-born white culture, continued to be forced out of even the worst neighborhoods. As well, upon the arrival of the Irish in the 1840s, African Americans found themselves the target of ever mounting aggression within the urban areas where they had often flourished in small enclaves. Meanwhile, women, lacking employment opportunities in the few labor fields open to male ethnic Others, frequently lived lives of physical abuse, sexual violence, and stunning rates of mortality in childbirth. No two populations suffered as acutely throughout the nineteenth-century as members of these two groups. For a good examination of life in these working class areas, see Tyler Anbinder, *Five Points: The Nineteenth Century New York Neighborhood That Invented Tap Dance, Stole Elections, and Became the World's Most Notorious Slum* (New York: Penguin, 2001). For an interesting overview of strong African American cultural expression before second-wave immigration, see Shane White, "'It Was a Proud Day:' African Americans Festivals and Parades in the North, 1741-1834," *The New African American Urban History*, eds. Kenneth W. Goings and Raymond A. Mohl (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1996).

segregated from but possessing skills and inclinations required by the American exemplar, thus became necessary adjuncts to the apparent hero of many of these pieces.⁴¹⁵

Judgments such as these inflect back upon the portrayed ethnicity in two fashions. First, as Eric Lott has argued in regard to antebellum minstrelsy, performances of stock types were generally believed to be based at least partly on utilization of characteristics observed in group members during lived non-theatrical culture.⁴¹⁶ As evidenced in Thomas Rice's lifelong assertion that "Jump Jim Crow" originated with his surreptitious observation of an "authentic" crippled African American farmhand, this link between referent and what would seem to be its patently exaggerated theatrical representation validated the act of witnessing for an American audience desirous of "real" life taking the stage. Due to its emphasis on observation as a necessary element of character composition, nascent American realism encouraged this ideation to become a more pronounced element of character interpretation by the audience. Said playwright Edward Harrigan of a theatre artist's life in the American city, "I am at work every day. Why, only the other day I spent three hours in a sailor's loft studying phrases and costumes and picking up useful information."⁴¹⁷ Well-publicized tactics such as this succeeded in creating an image of

⁴¹⁵ This framing on the variety stage followed a sequential pattern linked to immigration patterns and subsequent cultural reactions to apparent social contamination. When Irish citizens were the most recent arrived, native-born archetypes, such as Pastor's flag-waving, native-born songster, played at the fore of the variety stage while Irish characters brawled and told aggressively comic monologues. When the Italians arrived, the Irish ascended in status from shanty to lace curtain to middle-class. This saw a correlating shift in their variety stage identities: Italian characters, practically non-existent prior to third-wave immigration, began to appear as knife-wielding savages, while Irish figures, such as Pat Rooney I, took the stage as pleasant song-and-dance figures. Later, upon the arrival of various Slavic populations, the Italians transformed into merry acrobats.

⁴¹⁶ Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford UP, 1993) 38-40.

⁴¹⁷ Edward Harrigan, "Harrigan and Hart Part," 4 May 1885, Harrigan-Hart Collection, Harry Ransom Humanities Center, University of Texas, Austin.

the popular theatre as a form more intent on keeping its ears to the rails of American culture than its legitimate counterpart.

Arguably, this nod toward the evolving understanding of “realism” in the late nineteenth-century helped create the expectations soon to give rise to the rich dialogue of the local color plays and the pioneering scenography of Belasco. Though suspended at some remove from the multivalent and contradictory cultural markers of any authentic group, the variety theatre, in the popular imagination, imbued even its more outlandish representations with a sense of fidelity to their referents. Remembering Harrigan, whose local-color plays became contemporaries of Pastor’s variety afterpieces, years later in a letter to *The New York Evening Mail*, an S. Rosenbaum recalled that even Harrigan’s “wildest extravaganzas” possessed a “vivid realism,” rendering them “like a slice of life:”

I can never believe that Harrigan's burnt cork artists were Caucasians. I think that Dan Collyer was an assumed name of a lady of color that was kidnapped from around the corner on Seventh Avenue, and persuaded to enact her every day life behind the footlights. ... [Harrigan's] work at its best reflected an almost photographic view of the local life of his day.⁴¹⁸

Rosenbaum’s simultaneous embrace of a nearly photographic verisimilitude—high praise in the late nineteenth-century—and a wildly extravagant performance style precisely aligns with his confusion between a white, blacked-up male actor and the referent from Seventh Avenue. Yet Rosenbaum fails to understand that, in the most pernicious fashion, he has allowed referent and theatrical representation to nip at one another’s tail in an endlessly mirrored game between item and imago. Repetitive public circulation of a “real” African American woman through theatrical

⁴¹⁸ Rosenbaum, S. "A Letter for Old New Yorkers," *The Evening Mail*. Harrigan-Hart Collection, Harry Ransom Humanities Center, University of Texas, Austin.

representation reifies the character and all her correlative characteristics within non-theatrical culture. In a fashion consistent with propagation of dominance Collyer had indeed “kidnapped” the woman and “persuaded her to enact her every day life behind the footlights.” Furthermore, the patently false representations of Othered cultures foregrounded the “real” as an increasingly contested battleground for the American popular consciousness in the late nineteenth-century.

The ability to “perform” some of the requirements of a new culture, the issue at the heart of the acculturation process, demands that Pastor envision an actor constitutionally capable of adapting his behavior to suit his environment. That the ethnic Others from the Pastor afterpiece, like their counterparts in the editorial cartoons and popular novels of the day, interact unsuccessfully with the dominant culture does not necessarily disqualify them from acculturation. We find here a useful point in analyzing Pastor, who addresses an immigrant’s citizenship, cultural fluency and economic success in an industrializing society. Comic indictment of stupidity concerns itself with “an inability to understand and cope with those technical aspects of the modern world that are common to most countries rather than simply to a lack of understanding of local customs, practices, or forms of speech.”⁴¹⁹ The inability of our German saloon keeper to succeed at “poger” should thus be read as a mark of unsuccessful immersion within a foreign culture rather than stupidity: he knows a deck of card should have but four aces yet somehow assumes that “this game,” this unfamiliar American version, allows for the appearance of nine. As in the saloon, Pastor’s sketches consistently maintain this distinction between, in the words of one sketch, “wise men and fools:” those with the requisite information to successfully perform a cultural role and those without it. Nowhere in variety does one find the

⁴¹⁹ Davies, *Ethnic Humor* 15.

simplistic, widespread intellectual infantilization claimed by Lawrence Mintz.⁴²⁰

Instead, the variety afterpieces represent an historically transitional stage that would join the isolated “tribal” communities of the nineteenth-century to the comparatively integrated modern industrial state that characterized America from the Great Depression onward.

If the ethnic stage types in the variety theatre of the 1860s and 1870s evince at least the capacity to gain Americanism through acculturation, they also display an acute awareness of their own performance as ethnic figures. Ethnic Others commonly excuse or frame actions they recognize as violations of American social order through an explicit annunciation of their Othered ethnicity, proclaiming themselves an Irishman as they pull out a flask or a Dutchman before flailing away. (Our saloon keeper also begins a fight in the first stanza of the song, informing his audience, “But I tole you dey can't fool dis Dutchman, For I hit dem rite all of de mout!) Women such as Bridget or Peggy prioritize an adequate performance of their ethnic identity over that of a gender role expected of non-ethnic women. Indeed, they conceive of such performances as more firmly “Irishizing” them rather than masculinizing them.

Variety’s aesthetic also aided in highlighting the performative aspect of ethnicity. In addition to participating in the public rituals of ethnic convention, variety audiences, graced with a multi-act bill that featured a stock company, saw the same performers swapping in and out of ethnicities during the course of the variety bill; sometimes multiple shifts occurred within the afterpiece itself. During “Go West,” for example the actor playing Hans leaves his seat as a German, only to immediately pass through the car as an American exemplar railroad conductor. Ben, the urban

⁴²⁰ Mintz rightly distinguishes between “unintelligent” and “culturally naïve,” but misapplies Davies’ distinctive binary. His misreading of popular ethnic humor further asserts that a failure to significantly deviate from type invariably produces “flat representations.” Lawrence E. Mintz, “Humor and Ethnic Stereotypes in Vaudeville and Burlesque,” *MELUS*, Vol. 21, #4 (Fall 1996) 20-21.

American exemplar, exits, reenters as a fiery rural evangelical preacher, steals a pocketbook, exits, and re-enters as Ben. Dan, an Irishman, re-enters as a “nig,” accompanied by the former Bridget as his blacked-up Aunt Hannah. We thus encounter a variety theatre that presciently framed ethnicity as an odd admixture of lineage and learned performance, a view that at once acknowledges the very real points of origination that separated Americans while enabling a willed passage through a communal acculturation process. It would be a necessary precursor for the fomenting Americanization movement that would demand conscious role-playing as a “step toward the assimilation of minds and wills.”⁴²¹

The radicalism of Pastor’s position lies in this hearty embrace of partial acculturation in the face of nativist cries for straight assimilation. Pastor’s work, however, presents no “ideal” non-ethnic American culture capable of supporting his interest in social justice for the working class. The high-station American exemplars (e.g., the frequent Revolutionary War officers) turn their gazes from crippling class inequity toward an “honor” that can provide neither shelter nor a meal. Low-station American exemplars, those who should couple favored ethnic status to an energized commitment to class betterment, disperse their force in mawkish panegyrics to personal industry and country.

More often than not, it is the ethnic Others, through their willingness to take action and fearlessness in challenging received authority, that abet an American exemplar’s successful navigation of a difficult course. The very correlative characteristics that first appear so damning to their American existence prove invaluable to effective agency in a complex world. This differentiates the variety afterpiece’s conception of interactions between native-born and Othered ethnic

⁴²¹ Americanization proponent Grover Huebner uses this phrase in arguing for the need for “a building up of social solidarity” through American patriotism. Grover G. Huebner, “The Americanization of the Immigrant,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 27 (May 1906) 197.

characters from the “melting pot” ideal that took its name from Israel Zangwill’s 1907 play. The afterpieces did not “[blend and merge] all into one homogenous mass of undifferentiated American society” through a “unidirectional” transformation of the immigrant.⁴²² Instead, the performances suggested that a healthy pluralistic embrace of cultural persistence helped inoculate the nation against injurious stagnancy. As well, the performance of such capital engenders an American exemplar newly energized by forms of license (e.g., effective labor strikes) that may not originate with him, but in which he may take part as a comparatively mild adjunct in arms. In this, we finally find an alliance of interests responsive to the whole of society. The white, native born American—part of an idealized stock that, like Rourke’s early American types, recedes into the mists of the late eighteenth-century cannot perform the corrective actions demanded of him by the narrative.

Indeed, the plots of the various afterpieces continually place the American exemplar in positions where the corrective action envisioned by the author—usually sound beating or a chasing of an authority figure—would compromise his very character. The worldview Pastor and other afterpiece authors demonstrate throughout the afterpieces positions violence, calculation, and occasional vengefulness as a requisite elements for those who would bring social and economic redemption into being. Unwillingness to violate polite society in the furtherance of justice negates the attainment of equity. Ethnicity in the variety afterpiece thus arises as capable of granting license to act, to perform upon the cultural stage. Any success gained by the American exemplar, working class in station but not in temperament, is granted by the ethnic characters agreeing to associate themselves with his cause. Without such relation, we are told, the aims of “non-ethnic” America cannot help but founder.

⁴²² David L. Salvaterra, “Becoming American: Assimilation, Pluralism, and Ethnic Identity,” *Immigrant America: European Ethnicity in the United States*, ed. Timothy Walsh (New York: Garland Publishing, 1994) 31.

Pastor, in fact, demonstrates a prescient understanding that members of ethnic out-groups in America were deluged with competing and often mutually exclusive sets of “ethnic capital,” defined by George Borjas as “the whole set of ethnic characteristics—including culture, attitudes, and economic opportunity” to which one is exposed when in the midst of identity formation.⁴²³ As Borjas, an immigrant himself, argues, clinging too tightly to one’s original ethnic capital in a new society “puts the brakes on social mobility. . . . Ethnic capital provides the mechanism that lowers the flame under the melting pot from a full boil to a slow simmer.”⁴²⁴ Instead, the variety afterpieces under Pastor’s watch anticipate Lawrence Levine’s admonition to “stop talking about *dominance* and *purity* and begin speaking about *transformations*.”⁴²⁵ By pursuing the resolution of the piece’s central narrative, the afterpieces, I would argue, encouraged structural assimilation on the part of ethnic Others.⁴²⁶ The transformation Pastor seeks through his ethnic discourse is an acculturated American who has not surrendered all ethnic capital: an Othered ethnic self that has learned to function within and share mores with normative society. The both/neither stage was attractive for many. Some immigrant groups, as Victor Greene has argued of turn-of-the-century Jews, “believed that the maintenance of group identity was possible in America because the national philosophy fostered it.”⁴²⁷

⁴²³ George Borjas, *Heaven’s Door: Immigration Policy and the American Economy* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1999) 148.

⁴²⁴ Borjas 149.

⁴²⁵ Lawrence Levine, *The Opening of the American Mind: Canons, Culture, and History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996) 148.

⁴²⁶ I draw upon Milton Gordon’s assimilation model here. Additionally, it is important to note that this evolution on the part of the variety theatre stops short of further stages that involve intermarriage or dissolution of discrimination on the part of the in-group. The afterpiece’s move, while Progressive for its time, in no way conceptualized members of Othered ethnicities as equal participants in the nation’s aims. Milton Gordon, *Assimilation in American Life: The Role of Race, Religion, and National Origin* (New York: Oxford UP, 1964) 71.

⁴²⁷ Victor R. Greene, *American Immigrant Leaders, 1800-1910: Marginality and Identity* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1987) 85.

Pastor boldly suggests an America that flourishes when denying what George Devereux and Edwin Loeb find to be a natural process of “antagonistic acculturation” between ethnic peoples. Characterized by a culture’s “jealous regard for its own ethnic distinctiveness and cultural autonomy” such acculturation encourages groups to resist either borrowing or lending cultural capital between one another.⁴²⁸ Pastor places discussion of ethnic difference in service of his focus on economic class, a factor that joined these groups rather than separated them. In the midst of one of Pastor’s favorite topics, a strike, it is not the accent, dialect, or intemperance that establishes the important social boundaries, but one’s place in the scheme of industrial capitalism. Nor is the resolution of the central narrative problem found in sorting out and hierarchizing representatives of various ethnic groups on the basis of their ethnicity. Rather, individual members of these groups find their fates bound together, a fact echoed in their continued sharing of *mise en scene*. For all his unrepentant celebration of American cultural totems of the mid-nineteenth century, Pastor’s insistence on concord between ruling body and subject allows him to argue for a more fluid and continual dialogic process of acculturation between in- and out-groups than had been the case in the Know-Nothing heyday of the 1850s. For Pastor, the utility of the cultural complex—its ability to ameliorate the difficulties caused by an irresponsible ruling class—rather than its point of ethnic origin, looms as paramount concern. Ethnicity is not unimportant to Pastor; his faithfulness to inclusion of ethnic types and ethnic humor point to this. Provided that, Pastor nevertheless appears to have possessed a clear (and prescient) understanding that consuming ethnic divisiveness served no one so well as the mine owner and railroad magnate. If the madcap brutality and occasionally coarse language of ethnic

⁴²⁸ George Devereux and Edwin Loeb, “Antagonistic Acculturation,” *American Sociological Review* 7 (1943) 134, 139, 143.

performance framed the variety hall as a male environ—thereby limiting the number of working class patrons Pastor could address—they nonetheless allowed working class rancor to avoid inflecting back upon itself in fratricidal enmity.

Though the entire bill of variety houses contained a great deal of performance drawing upon ethnicity, afterpieces most directly gave voice to this new vision of America if for no other reason than that its stories usually brought multiple ethnic characters into the same narrative journey and had them share the same stage. Their richly diversified pool of ethnic types encouraged characters from different ethnic groups to explore avenues for concerted action, something impossible in the uni-vocal acts (e.g., a single Irish monologist) that distinguished other parts of the bill. During the two decades following the Civil War, Pastor refuted calls that such citizens—like Pastor, now often native born and ethnic Other—absent themselves from the looming battles of labor reform, safe housing, and adequate leisure time for laborers. Even points of disagreement or ridicule between ethnic Others in the afterpieces arose with a nuance, complexity, and immediacy that was simply not present when these divergent voices were not allowed to rise in concert within a single piece. As in “Go West,” German could speak to Italian, Irishman to American exemplar. Much of the English was fractured for comic effect, of course, but the ethnic Others were able to communicate fluently on the one issue that laces throughout Pastor’s variety afterpieces and songbooks: the social abjection, fear, and anger that accompanies poverty. For this reason, I believe, the figures against whom the ethnic Others so often struggled were those could imperil them financially: landlords, mine owners, and employers.

As we have seen, such inter-ethnic discourse also often served as a device for sociocultural critique denied to native-born characters, supporting the various playwrights’ belief that ethnic Others were not only an inevitable but a productive part

of the waxing nation. The mid to late nineteenth century Pastor afterpieces demonstrated, to borrow a line from Pastor's own pen, that "our country is great and wide enough to afford a home" to those who would seek it as such.⁴²⁹ Most importantly, Pastor sought to bring these varied parties together in an arena of discussion that preserved difference even as it ensured mechanisms for redress of social injustice.

This is not to paint the afterpieces in too warm and approving a light. In many ways, the variety afterpiece, the most popular act in what would shortly become the nation's most popular performance genre, vaudeville, proved injurious to citizens from the various represented nationalities. The joining together for working class purposes did not grant "foreign" ethnic types a full place as subjects and diverse authors of their own fates. The rigid taxonomy of ethnicity embraced and dramatized in Pastor's theatres played no small part in petrifying both its character types and their life world referents as debased Others upon these shores.

The variety afterpiece also preserved a strain of American thought that was deeply antagonistic toward full investiture of ethnic citizens into the American life prized by those in the cultural and economic hegemony. First, the iteration of normative stereotypes prevented great progress of ethnic characters beyond the hyphens of their doubled existence as *X-Americans*. An Irish female, for example, was understood to be forever circumscribed by her inclination to fight. The character conventions, though theatrical traditions with little fidelity to their life-world referents, in time became so rigidly adhered to by performers that, as Holger Kerstein argues of the period's "Dutch" humor, they attained the appearance of a self-perpetuating and

⁴²⁹ Tony Pastor, "New York Tour Around the World," Tony Pastor Collection, Harry Ransom Humanities Center, University of Texas, Austin: 2.

ultimately prescriptive “independent linguistic form.”⁴³⁰ Bound to conventional dress, action, properties, and political positions, few ethnic characters drawn from underprivileged sub-groups ever vaulted beyond the limiting confines of type into the realm of individuated dramatic agency. This embellished and pejorative fixity, when displaced onto the actual ethnic Americans to whom the characters were thought to refer, operated as what Ernest Gellner terms the “near-indelible traits” that separate the socially and economically mobile from those consigned to permanent out-group status in modern societies. Forever bound to the limitations of a character type by their ancestry, authentic immigrants or Americans of non-Anglo descent inherited shackles. Pastor, of course, had helped forge these links in the ritualistic denial of betterment in the afterpieces.

This fixity, a prizing of descent over consent (to use Sollors’s phrase), also neatly forbade meaningful romantic or sexual interaction between persons of different ethnic or racial groups. Locked into invariable channels of desire as firmly as they were bound to inevitable catch phrases, Pats romanced Bridgets and Fritzs married Katerinas. (African American men were kept at a safe distance from almost every white woman.) As Troy Duster persuasively argues, the obsessive forestalling of border crossing only highlights the absurdity of such imagined boundaries to Pastor. Pastor’s insistence on maintaining discrete categories situated in inadequate hegemonic taxonomies of race and ethnicity was meant to assert presence (e.g., Irish) even as it proclaimed lack (i.e., *not* American exemplar). Its inability to adequately account for the failures of the hopelessly rigid classifications only results in “supplanting one multitiered fiction with another.”⁴³¹ If it is a vision of a multi-ethnic

⁴³⁰ Holger Kerstein, “Using the Immigrant’s Voice: Humor and Pathos in Nineteenth Century ‘Dutch’ Dialect Texts,” *MELUS*, Vol. 21, No. 4 (Winter 1996) 5.

⁴³¹ Duster uses this phrase to speak of race “mixing.” Troy Duster, “The ‘Morphing’ Properties of Whiteness,” *The Making and Unmaking of Whiteness*, eds. Birgit Brander Rasmussen, Eric Klinenberg, Irene J. Nexica, and Matt Wray (Durham: Duke UP, 2001) 113, 114.

America joined in the pursuit of the common goal of economic betterment for the working class, it also frequently supplants complexity with simplicity.

Furthermore, the confraternity represented by the multi-ethnic afterpieces still centered the striving of the ethnic characters in relief against the American exemplar's central mission (e.g., rescue his fiancé, foil the plot of the British general, etc.) This remained true even when this mission, though inevitably informed by class conflict, served the individual exemplar more than the class as a whole (e.g., attempting to win back the hand of a lost working class love from the scurrilous landlord). If Othered ethnic types rarely existed as demonized barriers to the protagonist's journey, they became defined by their ability to serve as (sometimes unwitting) helpmeets to the American exemplar. The exemplar, stolid center to the often wild pinwheel of entertainment that was the afterpiece, also sanctified the piece with his presence, inuring the playlet by focusing ethnic ribaldry and violence. It is no accident that pieces containing the incidents of greatest ethnic violence often justify their presence by one of two central narratives: winning the American Revolution or saving a white, non-ethnic woman from danger. If Pastor was willing to endorse the occasional brawl in the relief of working class suffering, his theatre, a contemporary of Molly McGuire sensationalism, was not bold enough to license the more overtly Othered characters to broaden the fight into open class warfare. For this reason, the dénouement to the pieces most often frames the solution to the particular issue (e.g., a strike at a particular mine) as a separable, neatly cordoned off event from the larger struggle between classes. The permanent revolution would be left to the Wobblies and their kindred at the turn of the century.

Pastor's afterpieces faded away in the early 1880s, roughly the same period during which one may begin to speak of "vaudeville" as a form separable from variety. Simultaneously, popular theatre's employment of ethnic humor began an

inexorable decline in popularity and frequency of presentation that reflected changes within the industry, even as it informed the developing cultural debate about the nature of ethnicity as America neared the dawn of the twentieth-century. The less frequent presence of ethnic humor within corporate vaudeville was as gradual as it was complex and marked with exceptions. Ethnic performance did not suffer any fatal paroxysm at a satisfyingly definite historical point, but indeed continued as an important element throughout the tenure of vaudeville on the popular stage.

Some ethnic acts, such as Italian acrobats, English monologists, or American coon-shouters, were to develop tremendously popular and highly influential performance traditions during this time. Both native-born and new immigrant performers drew upon the shifting pool of ethnic Americans to create new and resonant archetypes in the American popular consciousness. (One 1910s reviewer approvingly commented that a slender Russian contortionist had “ribs as prominent as those of any Balkan refugee...”⁴³²) Traditional ethnic acts, such as violent duos of nonsensical Dutchmen, continued to maintain a presence across mature vaudeville. Most tellingly, however, performers of ethnicity—like their variety predecessors, “ethnic “ vaudevillians were not always members of the type at which they played—now appeared without the deeper context provided by the afterpiece’s story and cast of accompanying characters. Formerly, Dutch acts had played important roles in resolving a central narrative. Like Fritz, the dutiful and courageous German in the previously discussed “The Tenth Ward,” the ethnic Other frequently participated in an honorable action sanctified by the presence of the American exemplar. Ripped from the environment that framed them as full participators in the American journey—if not the reward—ethnic comedy acts now displayed their hoary stereotypes as one of the

⁴³² C.P.B., newspaper clipping, 1911-1912 File, Harvard Theatre Collection, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

chief justifications of the turn. It is not surprising, I would argue, that ethnic comedy begins to cede its prominent place on the vaudeville stage at this time. Stripped of the ability to meaningfully act, Pastor's great gift to the afterpiece's ethnic Others, the vaudeville ethnic comic became but another line of business that would wax and wane with fickle audience favor.

Indeed, the preponderance of ethnic material (particularly ethnic comedy) that had defined variety lessened greatly as vaudeville grew in national scope and popular dominance. Even though the sheer size of the entertainment's national undertaking meant that more ethnic acts were touring and the new immigration fostered new types of acts, the percentage of the bill devoted to ethnic material decreased. There have been numerous attempts to explicate the demise of ethnic material in the vaudeville house. John DiMeglio suggests the Progressive era's moral reformers played the key role in stomping out the risqué material that often laced ethnic acts.⁴³³ Douglas Gilbert locates a new wave of Jewish comedians near the point of vaudeville's demise in the 1920s (e.g., Lou Holtz, George Jessel), but somewhat vaguely indicts a "changing social expression," in part, as the culprit in the medium's continued decline in popularity.⁴³⁴ Similarly, Paul Distler identifies an "organic change" that led vaudeville's "temperament" into a shift away from the broad comedy that had defined many of the early popular ethnic acts. "A new sense of sophistication," Distler argues, robbed performers in the now cavernous and gilded theatres of the "context" in which much ethnic material could be appreciated.⁴³⁵ Both Distler and Geraldine Maschio also note the importance of various ethnic groups, benefited by the organizing impulse of Progressivism, formally protesting their representations on stage; Lawrence Mintz

⁴³³ John E. DiMeglio, *Vaudeville, U.S.A.* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green Popular Press, 1973).

⁴³⁴ Douglas Gilbert, *American Vaudeville: Its Life and Times* (New York: Whittlesey House, 1940) 366.

⁴³⁵ Paul Antonie Distler, "Exit the Racial Comics," *Educational Theatre Journal*, Vol. 18, No. 3 (Oct 1966) 253.

concur, finding “compelling evidence that ethnic humor on the variety stage suffered a more violent death, as opposed to simply having withered away.”⁴³⁶

Many of these contentions reveal important facets of the decline of ethnic material in vaudeville, though almost all invite questions regarding the reasons for the historical conjuncture of these varied causes and their single effect. While the “new sense of sophistication” Gilbert targets as a chief culprit was certainly a hallmark of polite vaudeville, popular theatre had previously celebrated its aptitude in puncturing the pretensions of class. (Antebellum minstrelsy’s darkey dandy character leaps to mind as an obvious example.) The “temperament” of variety had certainly proven elastic enough in previous decades to embrace ethnic acts that ran the gamut from high Italian opera to bawdy, licentious comedy. Finally, the organized resistance rightly targeted by Mintz, Distler, and Maschio had existed in various forms prior to the height of Progressivism. Its newfound efficacy requires more explication than is provided in simply aligning out-group protest with the era of Progressive reform.

In the following section I wish to argue that several factors, among these performer specialization, a shift in immigration patterns, and the rise of Americanization led both to the decline of ethnic material and to a less discussed shift of ethnic performance from comedy into specialty acts and pathetic dramas. Sadly, now that Progressivism’s organization finally matched its spiritedness, fewer and fewer ethnic types displayed strong agency on the vaudeville stage. In part, this results from shifts in managerial attention. The new titans of polite vaudeville—Keith, Albee, Walker, Proctor, Pantages—began to succeed in variety entertainments only when variety acquiesced to the siren song of midtown money. Though none of these managers was raised in the great luxury now represented in their theatre décor,

⁴³⁶ Geraldine Maschio, “Ethnic Humor and the Demise of the Russel Brothers,” *Journal of Popular Culture*, Vol. 26, No 1 (Summer 1992). Lawrence E. Mintz, “Humor and Ethnic Stereotypes in Ethnic Humors and Burlesque,” *MELUS*, Vol. 21, No. 4 (1996) 27.

neither had any of them developed a history of supporting working class (and thus immigrant) causes. In variety, Pastor had been a stolid supporter of working class identity. His new space on 14th St., however, precluded him from employing ethnic Others as such flagrantly disruptive and counter-hegemonic characters. Pastor finally had his middle class audience; it had only cost him the ability to continue the advocacy that had once been among the most important aims of his career.

From a structural perspective, the most important shift away from a high degree of ethnic content resulted from the collapse of the stock variety company under corporate vaudeville. Within the span of a few years in the early 1880s, nearly every newly minted vaudeville house abandoned the familiar group of players that had made up local variety companies and adopted the booking of specialized acts. Where variety theatres had once employed a group that, though certainly somewhat specialized, played across many ethnic boundaries, vaudeville now idealized successful performers as experts usually restricted to given ethnic lines. Variety theatre's embrace of the specialist rose from the genre's attempt to increase patronage as it evolved in form from the concert saloon and variety hall into the vaudeville playhouse of the 1880s and 1890s. Pre-vaudeville variety performance maintained a delightful insistence upon "local flavor," often employing a standing company in much the fashion of the contemporary legitimate stage. Such performances, however, obviously lacked a certain variety to their variety: playing largely to the same crowds with the same actors, variety strained to provide the panoply of acts that would drive the increased spectatorship of its successor.

Brooks McNamara, in his excellent history of New York City's concert saloons, speculates that the same performers might even appear several different times in each evening's bill, here in blackface, there in drag.⁴³⁷ McNamara's presumption is

⁴³⁷ McNamara 30-31.

reasonable, especially as variety drew off the similar tradition in legitimate theatre. Employing fewer performers decreased the theatre's payroll. While a host of reasons contributed to the small reach of variety when compared to vaudeville (e.g., lack of administrative infrastructure, an era that preceded the rise of the national magazine), the saturation of the audience with overly familiar acts created a pool of spectators who probably attended with far less regularity than the later weekly vaudeville audiences. No amount of makeup could obscure the fact that they had seen many of these performers and acts time and again. One secret to increasing patronage thus lay in turning over product more rapidly while providing greater distinction within each evening's performance. Obviously, changing bills weekly required more highly differentiated acts, in turn giving rise to the specialist.

Furthermore, performers that formerly appeared as several different ethnic types seem to have seized upon specialization as a means of playing to their own particular strengths. Rather than remaining situated for some time at a given theatre performing in multiple acts on the bill in varied ethnic guises—not all of which featured one at one's best—the performer instead developed a given “line” of performance, abandoning, say, his adequate Dutch clog dancing to craft an exceedingly deft Irish comic monologue. Even within given sub-categories of vaudeville performance (e.g., duo dancing, juggling, comic monologues) the assumed correlative characteristics of a given ethnicity were often geared to particular performance styles of certain actors. A monologist skilled in eliciting empathy through befuddlement, for example, would be more likely to adopt a Dutch character than he would an Irish type.⁴³⁸

⁴³⁸ Such choices naturally involved exceptions to given ethnic types. Though most German characters, for example, were taken to be fairly awkward in conversation many comics in the popular theatre attempted to turn the convention on its head by crafting verbally adept Dutch characters. See Kersten pp. 8-11.

The flowering of specialization within the vaudeville house mirrored the same phenomenon in other professions of the late nineteenth-century in developing both a narrowly defined skill and a level of expertise that assured adept performers a long line of suitors waiting to bid for their services. The advantage in negotiating contracts gradually swung from the theatre manager, who had provided steady employment in the palmy 1860s and early 1870s, to the specialist, who now controlled part of a limited supply of expertise within his line of performance. The distance between the fields of trick roping and thoracic surgery—both of which might now be shoehorned within the widened rubric of “professionalism”—was not nearly so great as a modern conception of their relative cultural importance would have one believe. Like judges (now distinct from lawyers) and pharmacists (no longer working as physicians), vaudeville specialists spent years developing expertise within a single line of employment. As well, upon specializing, that vaudevillian immediately found herself placed in a hierarchy of workers in her type. Wanting “the best” for their own houses, vaudeville managers ceaselessly sorted out performers based on their abilities and demonstrated drawing appeals

The vaudeville specialist therefore functioned as an important working class analogue to the middle class professional, preceding and preparing the way for the rise of specialization that would vivify trade unions in the twentieth-century. The vaudeville specialist, freed of the omnibus stock company role that had often prevented greater intricacy and inventiveness with individual routines, also became an important means of introducing technological advancements into the industrial age. Rem. Brandt, an “artoonist” touring in the 1910s, created his works before audiences fascinated with his implement of choice: a pneumatic brush.⁴³⁹ The Salambos, a

⁴³⁹ Newspaper clipping, 1911, Scrapbook 1911-1912 season, Pat Rooney II Collection, Harry Ransom Center for the Humanities, University of Austin, Austin, Texas.

male-female duo at the turn of the century, drew in audiences with a series of electrical demonstrations. One manager, though lauding the duo's ability to hold the audience, commented that the act was also clearly a fake. The electrical gimmick that lay at the heart of their act, the "wireless telegraph," would not become practical for another fifteen years.⁴⁴⁰ (Perhaps reflecting a growing apprehension of the admixture of fascination and uneasiness associated with technology, the male in the act began dressing as Mephisto the following year.⁴⁴¹)

Specialization also helped performers persisting in vaudeville's ethnic acts resist, for a time, the encroaching forces of commodification within popular entertainments. Such commoditization destroys individual nuance in the interest of impersonal sale and consumption. In this, one presumes "a labor that has been departicularized, lost all specificity, and become comparable with any other form of labor."⁴⁴² Though performers certainly had areas of focus and renown in pre-vaudeville popular American theatre—the very existence of well defined ethnic types or need for banjo soloists presumes this—the acceptance of specialization became a tacit corporate acknowledgement of valuable, marketable and salable difference within various segments of its labor force. A duo of Hebrew comedians, after all, was in direct competition only with others within its particular line, and the hiring of one such group would necessarily exclude similar acts from that week's bill. The rise of specialization thus created an increasingly narrow pool of generalists from which the manager or booking agent could draw to fulfill needs within ethnic lines.⁴⁴³

⁴⁴⁰ S.K. Hodgdon, Manager's Report (New York City), 01 Dec. 1902, Keith-Albee Collection, University of Iowa, Iowa City. H.A. Daniels, Manager's Report (Philadelphia), 08 Dec. 1902, Keith-Albee Collection, University of Iowa, Iowa City.

⁴⁴¹ Manager's Report (Orpheum), 05 Jan. 1903, Keith-Albee Collection, University of Iowa, Iowa City.

⁴⁴² Mary Ann Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, and the Archive* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2003) 7.

⁴⁴³ The salutary effects of specialization within vaudeville's performing pool were somewhat atypical when compared to other such shifts within working class occupations, where such particularization often experienced a rough and crippling entrance. The introduction of the narrowly trained "piecemaker" (e.g., a shingle installer) into the profession of the comprehensively skilled "carpenter"

From a variety playhouse that had often featured multiple acts drawing upon the same ethnic types (e.g., an afterpiece featuring an Irishman following an Irish vocalist) rose a vaudeville theatre that, with an eye toward diversity, carefully portioned out the appearance of ethnic acts. Vaudeville houses now had to make room for films, animal acts, fashion displays, trick shot artists, and intellectuals, none of whom worked in a line much associated with any particular ethnic type. The preponderance of acts not normally given to ethnicizing their turns simply left less room on the bill for the many other ethnic acts. As well, where variety, originally operating on a single proprietor stock company system, had often spoken of its acts as “old friends,” vaudeville managers now competed against one another in securing novel acts. To many, traditional ethnic performance seemed antiquated. In his “Ten Commandment of Vaudeville,” George Jean Nathan found that the moldiness of the acts contributed to a pitiable laxness. “Thy Irish comedians shall adulterate the English language with a German accent,” he informed his readers, “and the German comedians shall adulterate it with a brogue.”⁴⁴⁴

Therefore while ethnic acts remained susceptible to the forces of the industry’s market—the relative value of certain lines of ethnic performance ebbed and flowed like segments of the burgeoning stock market—vaudevillians playing in ethnic acts appear to have embraced specialization as a means to create a rarer and thus more valuable type of performance. The managers’ newly articulated “vaudeville,” a genre of entertainment that frequently promised “something for everyone,” prized

during the 1870s, for example, gave rise to an increase in scorn matched only by its deflation in wages. Quite often, laborers of the 1870s and 1880s viewed specialization as subtle and pernicious tool employed by management in its drive to enforce dependency upon its laborers. One proficient in the execution of only a segment of the final product, after all, most often depended upon the binding effects of industrial capital to join the fragments into a salable whole. As well, a narrow range of skills robbed the laborer of the possibility of working in other aspects of the wider occupation when the need for a given industrial task decreased. Robert Christie, *Empire in Wood: A History of the Carpenters’ Union*. (Ithaca, NY: The New York State School of Industrial and Labor Relations, 1956).

⁴⁴⁴ George Jean Nathan, “Ten Commandments of Vaudeville,” *Bohemian Magazine*, July 1904: 66.

specialized, highly differentiated ethnic acts within the body of the bill, ultimately leading to the enrichment and valorization of the performer, a striking change from earlier conventions that had presumed the theatre manager the locus of art as well as commerce. Specialization had located the performance within the corpus of the performer, rather than the persona of the manager or structure of the hall. Though vaudeville magnate B.F. Keith would loom as national paragon of propriety and the Gilded Age theatres would become permanent monuments to the grandiose, star performers in vaudeville trumped both in salability.

Freed from a residential existence with a single employer, however, most performers proved all too willing to abandon such contracts when another offered more money, a longer engagement, or a more convenient jump between two other bookings. One turn-of-the-century critic notes that many in this new category of performance demonstrated “notoriously poor business” skills.⁴⁴⁵ The result was chaos. One manager, hectored for an engagement for months in 1894, finally granted a booking date to a combination act, only to have the turns later accept a richer payday elsewhere. In a personal letter whose ebullience only barely fails to disarm its ability to madden, the jilted manager is reminded, “You know what Show Business is. Do the best you can and take no chances. A Bird in the hand is worth two in a Bush. Hoping we can do Business Some other time.”⁴⁴⁶ The problem appears to have increased throughout the 1880s, blossoming into a near crisis in the 1890s.

The salvation of the specialization lay, ironically, in vaudeville’s own version of the trust. Only with the rise of vaudeville chains—beginning with the Keith-Albee efforts in the early 1890s—did a handful of managers consolidate enough power to bring order within their foundering oligarchy. As with many abuses of centralized

⁴⁴⁵ Francis Peck Smith, “In Vaudeville”, *The Green Book Album*: 144.

⁴⁴⁶ Reeves, Al. To “Manager Moore” [sic]. 01 August 1894, Harvard Theatre Collection, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

industry in the period, management offered what at first seemed a boon to the laborer in the form of steady employment. Replacing the frequently haphazard scheduling of week-to-week travel and often arduous jumps between far-flung locales with a sensibly planned trek through a chain's various houses, a circuit was able to offer the vaudevillian far more security. By 1906, performers could obtain contracts for up to two years within a given vaudeville empire, a far cry from the days of cobbling together enough weeks to survive. As well, because the performers now represented salable (and now salaried) goods for a mass audience, chains carefully calibrated travel to keep them off the road and in the theatres as much as possible, no small consideration to a group as road weary and expense-laden as vaudevillians.⁴⁴⁷ That both booking agents and theatre managers sometimes colluded to fix salaries or blacklist performers appears to have been accepted as one of the necessary evils of steady employment.⁴⁴⁸

Italian acrobats, Hebrew monologists, and their fellows paid a price for such improvements in working conditions, as circuits gained dominance throughout the late 1890s. While the number of weeks they worked each year increased, managers initially lowered weekly salaries under booking contracts. The freedom of their former years as independent contractors also lay behind most performers on the big-time vaudeville circuit. In a disheartening paean to the rise of centralized control in vaudeville one turn-of-the-century author confides that

Once engaged, the artists are under check. A complete record of them is kept in the offices of the booking organization which has employed them, and the

⁴⁴⁷ "The Gigantic Vaudeville Merger Completed." *New York Dramatic News*. 23 June 1906. Harvard Theatre Collection, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

⁴⁴⁸ For a fuller discussion of vaudeville booking, see Robert Snyder, *The Voice of the City: Vaudeville and Popular Culture in New York* (New York: Oxford UP, 1989) 63-74.

particular booking manager who has them at any of his houses can tell you in five minutes, upon request, just where any one of them is to be found. . . .”⁴⁴⁹

Despite the best attempts of vaudeville’s tortuously ambitious and unsuccessful labor organizing efforts, in 1906, hard in the midst of trust-busting Theodore Roosevelt’s second term, vaudeville magnates found themselves in the position to announce that over 90% of the nation’s booking would soon be controlled by a single combine.⁴⁵⁰ The vaudevillians certainly considered the rising restrictions on their various freedoms nettlesome, even at times galling, but most accepted centralized authority with frustrated resignation.⁴⁵¹ Vaudeville circuits such as the Keith-Albee and the Orpheum chains, evolving from the less economically efficient local theatres that had defined earlier variety, had, after all, ensured the front-line professionals greater annual income and steadier work. The goal, in the end, was to avoid spending one’s time at the southeast corner of New York City’s 44th and Broadway, the gathering place for “at liberty” variety performers.⁴⁵²

The circuit’s and manager’s control became a key (and heretofore unexamined) factor in lessening the amount of ethnic material in vaudeville, particularly in regard to the broader, more patently offensive material that trafficked in gross stereotypes. As previously mentioned, scholars such as Mintz, Distler, and Maschio have highlighted the importance of organized protest by ethnic out-groups in

⁴⁴⁹ As I argued in Chapter 2, this tight control over location and booking would soon extend to regimented censorship of material. Francis Peck Smith, “In Vaudeville”, *The Green Book Album*: 144. George Fuller Golden, *My Lady Vaudeville and Her White Rats* (New York: Broadway Publishing Co., 1909) 95-97.

⁴⁵⁰ “The Gigantic Vaudeville Merger Completed,” *New York Dramatic News*, 2223 Jun. 1906.

⁴⁵¹ The reassertion of managerial power affected pocketbooks as well as personal freedom with its creation of booking fees, calculated as a percentage of a performer’s weekly salary. Performers, led by The White Rats, the most remarkable of vaudeville’s many unsuccessful forays into union organization, formed their own short-lived booking office in 1900 in an effort to reclaim this lost income. As I argued earlier, this tight control over location and booking would soon extend to regimented censorship of material. Golden 95-97.

⁴⁵² “And Still The Corpse Carries On.” *New York Times*. 29 October 1944. Harvard Theatre Collection, “Variety and Vaudeville-1931-40.”

combating material they viewed as offensive. By 1903, Keith-Albee's Boston manager M.J. Keating was already fearful of Jewish protest for some of the theatres' recent offerings. "This is an allegedly Hebrew comedy act," he fumed in a report to the central office, "but the makeup is disgusting and the dialogue a perfect drivell." Recently bitten by the protests of "Hibernian" citizens, Keating warned his employers, "Some day the Hebrews are going to make as big a kick as the Irish did against this kind of burlesque of their nationality."⁴⁵³ Though the national interest in organization and social change naturally lent weight to out-group protest during the Progressive era, only the rise of the specialist enabled the effective institutional quashing of material now deemed beyond the pale of the polite vaudeville house. Separated from a company, nationally monitored by the corporate office of vaudeville's corporate titans, and censored through sometimes weekly alteration of their material, individual acts fought battles over material with giant corporations that sometimes controlled years' worth of their bookings.

Additionally, the rise of specialization, while turning the proportion of available acts to contracts finally to the slight advantage of performers also created a national category of sometimes interchangeable acts. If a smaller percentage of the performing pool was now portraying Irish characters than had been the case in Pastor's variety house, it was now easier to adeptly replace that single component of the show represented by the ethnic specialist with a fellow expert in that narrowly defined line. The regional and national scope of the chains also increased the efficiency of organized protest. Picketing at a Keith theatre in Chicago, for example, caused the chain to reevaluate its policies on a nation-wide basis. In the days of the single-proprietor variety house, such collective action would have mandated repetitive,

⁴⁵³ M.J. Keating, Manager's Report (Boston), 13 Jul. 1903, Keith-Albee Collection, University of Iowa, Iowa City.

locally organized protest on a city to city, theatre to theatre basis. Now, individual protests, such as the ones experienced by Keating in Boston, resonated on a national level (because of his duty to report it to corporate headquarters) and informed transcontinental corporate policies. For the first time, it was possible for a single, well-documented act of resistance to take on medium-wide consequences.

Shifts in immigration patterns in the late nineteenth century also militated against a high percentage of ethnic material within vaudeville. Throughout the 1880s animus toward immigrants had increased throughout the native-born population and previously established immigrant communities. In part, this reflected perceived competition over resources such as housing and employment. Harsh economic conditions for the working class in the late 1870s allowed demagogic blandishments to find purchase where once the needs of thriving industrialism had inculcated a tolerance born of necessity.⁴⁵⁴ Such rancor flowered quickly partly because, for all its hosannas praising America as a haven, the discourse of mid to late nineteenth century American ethnicity had preserved and reinforced inviolate ethnic distinction between the nation's citizens. While such fissures enabled the articulation of group identity (and accompanying social benefits, such as economic support of one's ethnic fellows) they also preserved discrete identities that could be marshaled against one another to devastating effect. Many measures aimed at the suppression of those newly viewed as competitors for scarce resources. Often they represented not simply the exteriorization of diffuse personal enmity but a calculated move in response to a well-articulated perceived threat, such as the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 following the railroad strikes of the late 1870s. The reactions to swelling Chinese immigration in

⁴⁵⁴ Susan Olzak argues that the combination of "economic contraction" (present, for example, during the Panics of 1884, 1890, 1896, and 1901) "with high immigration rates raises levels of ethnic competition" that may result in such discord. Susan Olzak, *The Dynamics of Ethnic Competition and Conflict* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1992) 37.

this period, as Thomas Curran has noted, represented a particular combination of simultaneous boundary threats to white native-born race, religion and nationality.⁴⁵⁵

The centering of opposition to Chinese immigration on racial markers noted a growing discomfiture with immigrants who appeared farther removed from the Anglo-American model that had always lurked at the heart of “non-ethnic” stereotypes such as the American exemplar. Whatever their faults or propensities for social disruption, Euro-descendant stock characters from variety’s afterpieces were drawn from ethnic groups close to the imagined core of “whiteness” that held together the constellation of northern European ethnicities: Irish, German, and English. As early as 1854, in the heart of the Know-Nothing fervor and only seven years removed from the first swell of Irish famine immigration, Humphrey Marshall, America’s Commissioner to China under Franklin Pierce, contended, “To be overrun by the diverse races of Europe is doubtless evil enough, but whether Celtic, Teutonic or Anglo-Saxon, confraternity, if impossible, is at least approachable.”⁴⁵⁶ Italian and Slavic characters, members of a doubly Othered ethnic sub-group (*not* American/*not* familiar Exotic), seldom appeared on the variety stage; even less frequently were they allowed the range of agency provided their predecessors in immigration.

⁴⁵⁵ The various measures enacted or suggested in hope of quelling Chinese immigration offer clear examples of two major shifts in the native-born ethos around the time vaudeville firmed up its generic restrictions in the early 1880s. First, like the “Know-Nothing” anti-Catholic antagonism, this developing view located a root of its vitriol in the sheer mass of the Othered group. Yet whereas earlier anti-Catholic sentiment had spoken bitterly of disparities in family size—thus creating the possibility that Protestant Americans could be “bred” out of political power by a rapidly multiplying interior contaminant—nativist discourse of the early 1880s perceived the numerical threat to “real” Americans as an exterior force: four hundred million Chinese nationals. Thus the goal shifted from one of repression (of Othered citizens) to exclusion (of future immigrants), a shift that radically demonized those who had often been viewed as necessary elements to America’s growth. This fear of the “numberless millions,” to use California Governor Leland Stanford’s ominous characterization of Asia’s inhabitants, later encompassed the European ethnic groups that formed the core of vaudeville’s character pool. Within a few years fear, legislated into the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, had permeated immigration debate throughout the country and involved a host of American ethnicities whose increase in numbers revoked their previous benignity. Stanford qtd. in Thomas J. Curran, *Xenophobia and Immigration, 1820-1930* (New York: Twayne, 1975) 83.

⁴⁵⁶ qtd. In Curran 79-80.

Undoubtedly, such exclusions reflected some proportional representation as well as lack of communal performance conventions. In 1875, six years before Pastor's famous "clean bill" was to help launch polite vaudeville, only 10% of American immigrants came from eastern or southern Europe; by 1902 76.2% of American immigrants hailed from these areas.⁴⁵⁷ Yet the gradual shift away from ethnic performance also represented a conviction on the part of many audience members that the new wave of immigrants were disconcertingly "inbetween peoples," to use David Roediger and James Barrett's phrase.

A whole range of evidence—laws, court cases, expert opinions on race, social conventions, and popular culture in the form of slang, songs, films, cartoons, ethnic jokes, and popular theatre—suggests that the native-born and older immigrants often placed these newer immigrants not only *above* African and Asian Americans, for example, but also *below* "white" people.⁴⁵⁸

In the vaudeville house, the relatively scant presence and often brutal treatment of characters from these ethnic groups spoke to the audience's discomfort with fully embracing them within a now ancient typology. Where Pastor's 1870s train afterpiece granted each ethnic character seats in the same car, 1911's "Fun In a Railroad Station" envisions a different method of immigrant travel: two recently arrived Italian immigrants, unable to make the ticket agent understand they "wanta da tick to San Fransisk," are labeled as baggage, tied together with a rope, and flung into the luggage car.⁴⁵⁹ An 1899 critic, glancing at one Italian audience member, finds they do not always understand the more nuanced material, yet nonetheless manage to refrain from

⁴⁵⁷ U.S. Immigration Commission, *Abstracts of Reports of the Immigration Commission*, Vol. 1 (Washington, D.C.: 1911) 61-63.

⁴⁵⁸ David Roediger and James Barrett, "Inbetween Peoples: Race, Nationality, and the 'New-Immigrant' Working Class," *Colored White: Transcending the Racial Past* (Berkeley: University of California Press) 139.

⁴⁵⁹ Leo J. Curley, "Fun in a Railroad Station," Pat Rooney II Collection, Harry Ransom Humanities Center, University of Texas, Austin.

vulgarity while eating their sausages and drinking their “wines of Ohio.” Not all, he finally decides, are “ignorant mountaineers and clodpoles.”⁴⁶⁰ Such benign disdain often represented the high-water mark of regard from native-born and northern European immigrants. Though the period from 1900 to 1920 saw the additions of several incisive characters to vaudeville’s ethnic typology (notably, the Jewish monologist and the bumbling but sincere Sicilian), the decline in ethnic performance continued.⁴⁶¹

Finally, the heightened importance placed upon fuller acculturation during the Americanization movements from the late 1890s through the popular decline of vaudeville in the late 1920s fundamentally shifted the manner in which the popular consciousness conceptualized the play of ethnicity that defined much previous material. Under the assimilation models that had accompanied the birth of the nation, American immigrants did not expect to surrender their ethnic past, but relocate to specialized communities that helped them maintain ethnic distinctiveness. In 1782, J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur, whose *Letters from an American Farmer* provided epistolary seduction for hundreds of European emigrants, painted a country graced by, rather than riven with, ethnic diversity. New citizens, the Franco-American assured

⁴⁶⁰ “Night Life in the Bend” (1899), Harvard Theatre Collection, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

⁴⁶¹ Performance of Jewish characters during this period remains an exception to this general lessening. As the Hebrew acts began to shed the offensively outsized costumes and exaggerated make-up of the late nineteenth-century, they arguably remained the only assemblage of ethnic characters to increase in incisiveness, complexity, and power as the medium died. Eric Goldstein persuasively argues that Jewish characters in the Progressive Era benefited, in part, from American popular culture’s association of the Jew with modernity, urbanism, and intellectualism, all welcome ascriptive characteristics during the rise of industrial capital. The Jewish home, meanwhile, was “seen as a source of morality” whose inhabitants “had been able to preserve their age-old religious code and employ it as a moral guide as they faced the vagaries of life in the modern world.” Thomas Curran, however, notes that similar ascriptive characteristics, such as continued boundary maintenance of their out-group and a perceived facility with finance, allowed 1890s xenophobes to condemn “the Shylocks who own and control the output of gold.” Eric L. Goldstein, “The Unstable Other: Locating the Jew in Progressive-Era American Racial Discourse,” *American Jewish History*, Vol. 89, No. 4 (2002) 391, 394, 395. Herman Ahlwardt qtd. In Curran 113.

them, need not abandon their defining cultures, but could instead find smaller ethnic enclaves within the boundaries of their adopted homeland.

No sooner does a European arrive, no matter what condition, than his eyes are opened upon the fair prospect: he hears his language spoke, he retraces many of his own country manners, [and] he perpetually hears the names of families and towns with which he is acquainted....”

The very size of the young nation, Crevecoeur argues, allows ethnic distinctiveness without the unhappy conjunction of dissimilar peoples that sparked European antipathies. America’s vastness militates against “that perpetual collision of parties” that cannot help but create “that contention which oversets so many.”⁴⁶²

Eventually, Crevecoeur argues becoming an American lies beyond any ethnic transmutation but instead involves an appreciation of liberty for the purpose of accumulating property. “The most laudable schemes” for generating capital, formerly extinguished by European class restrictions and scarcity of resources, “ripen into maturity” in the more hospitable American climes. Abandoning “the bed of sorrow on which he used to lie,” the immigrant “begins to feel the effects of a sort of resurrection.”⁴⁶³ Those pursuing the “municipal blessing” of property, Crevecoeur writes, cannot wholly escape their ethnic selves but are instead deterministically bound to the innate characteristics of their various ethnicities. “From whence the difference arises I know not,” he maintains, “but out of twelve families of emigrants of each country, generally seven Scotch will succeed, nine Germans, and four Irish.” (The natural frugality of the Scots cannot offset the advantage German families gain from industrious women; neither group is as vexed as the litigious, quarrelsome,

⁴⁶² J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur, *Letters from an American Farmer, Historical Aspects of the Immigration Problem: Select Documents*, ed. Edith Abbot (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969) 17.

⁴⁶³ Crevecoeur 18.

inebriated, and violent Irish.) Tellingly, within the latter group Crevecoeur discovers smaller nodes of ethnic identification based on their county of origin that splinter the Irish into incommensurably distinct parties. “One would think,” the writer shares in a rare moment of evident frustration, “on so small an island an Irishman must be an Irishman; yet it is not so.”⁴⁶⁴

The ethnic indelibility conceptualized by Crevecoeur to various European ethnicities promoted an assimilation model that was to inform American ethnic theory throughout the succeeding century. In part, this denial of in-group status reflects a hegemonic attempt to create an exclusive, standard, white American ethnicity that could in turn offer heightened socio-cultural status to the self-selected members. The continued maintenance of an ethnic identity that bent to assimilation even as it resisted acculturation also served the aims of rising industrialism throughout the century. Denied full investiture within mainstream American society, ethnic out-groups developed elaborate mechanisms of social, cultural, and economic support that preserved viable concentrations of the population for continued exploitation, all without requiring the expenditure of funds from consolidated capital. The persistence of multiple European ethnicities, while ensuring frequent (and often violent) competition for resources between out-groups, also prevented fuller and earlier moves toward organizing labor. Indeed, when members of given immigrant groups had worked together long enough to lessen the ferocity with which they maintained such boundaries the resultant intermingling invariably expressed itself through labor advocacy.⁴⁶⁵ Various doctrines of assimilation, all of which sought to keep Othered

⁴⁶⁴ Crevecoeur 20.

⁴⁶⁵ Employers played their part in preventing cross-ethnic organization. In 1884, when members of second-wave immigration (primarily from Germany, Britain, Ireland, and Canada) in the mining industry collectively attempted to recover from the union-busting of the 1870s, mine owners simply shipped in third-wave immigrants (Italians, Hungarians, and Poles) from the city labor exchanges. Charlotte Erickson, *American Industry and the European Immigrant, 1860-1885* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1957) 109.

ethnicities culturally atomized, largely self-supporting, and subservient to their employers, served capitalistic abuses throughout the nineteenth-century.

Americanization attempted to bring many more fully within an American core idealized as non-ethnic. Like most of the reforms pursued under Progressivism, Americanization was partly driven by genuinely altruistic impulses on the part of the emerging middle class. Like C.F. Switzer, the Midwestern principal whose fretting opened this chapter, they fretted about the ability of resistantly ethnic citizens to read a ballot, educate their children, and wisely solicit medical assistance. Many, like sociologist Henry Pratt Fairchild in 1913, also saw Americanization as a system of processes that necessarily exceeded the skills of social organizations and the confines of the classroom. Dismissing the “state of lethargy” that often accompanied the knowledge that “there is a committee at work on the problem” in Progressive America, Fairchild suggests that the “spiritual affiliation” with a more American temperament could begin with “every *real* American family in the land” (emphasis mine) establishing a “genuine friendship, unself-conscious, uncondescending, natural, and spontaneous with one foreign family.”⁴⁶⁶ The pool of such “foreigners,” for Fairchild, are persons who fail to respond “implicitly, spontaneously, and unreservedly to the appeals of American values...”⁴⁶⁷ In other words, the Americanizing mission invoked by Fairchild, while gilded with the egalitarian aims of Progressivism, re-categorizes second and third-generation immigrants as once again foreign.⁴⁶⁸ Fairchild indicts some reformers themselves for the continued presence of non-American

⁴⁶⁶ Fairchild allows however, “in some of the states, like Rhode Island, there would hardly be enough American families to go around.” Henry Pratt Fairchild, *Immigration: A World Movement and Its American Significance* (New York: Macmillan, 1913) 415, 417, 423.

⁴⁶⁷ Fairchild 417.

⁴⁶⁸ “Real Americans,” of course, need not demonstrate the visceral spontaneity Fairchild demanded of ethnic Others. In a revealing moment, Fairchild acknowledges a native-born citizen’s “natural alienation” from such persons, and suggests that the native-born family’s genuine, unself-conscious, natural, and spontaneous friendship with its ethnic counterpart may thrive if the real Americans consciously “inhibit” their feelings of antipathy for the sake of their social mission. Fairchild 423.

culture within families of such long-standing. The “broad-minded outlook” of “persons of a naturally liberal disposition,” he maintains, promoted an injurious “haziness” in regard to the process of Americanization. Seeking to clarify the aims of the reform movement, the sociologist, himself active in laying the earlier theoretical underpinnings of efforts to “naturalize” American sentiment, rejects earlier metaphors of melting pots and looms. “The traits of foreign nationalities can neither be merged or interwoven,” he asserts. “They must be *abandoned*.”

How much would be left of a true American nationality if there were perpetuated side by side the languages of Lithuania, Poland, and Denmark, the moral codes of Albania, France, and Scotland, the sanitary habits of Italy, Greece, and Sweden, the family institutions of Turkey, Slovakia, and Norway, the class feelings of Romania, Switzerland, and England, and so on *ad infinitum*?⁴⁶⁹

Performance of such ethnic markers and display of this ethnic cultural capital had only infrequently reflected an authentic or comprehensive examination of given groups. The “class feelings” of England, for example, rarely played out through English textile workers; the “sanitary habits of Italy” provoke Fairchild’s almost palpable shudder partly because the period’s American popular culture would have understood the term to be oxymoronic. Yet whether it was authentic or the sediment of theatrical tradition and popular prejudice, ethnic material began to be swept away by the loudening cry to “abandon” the “traits of foreign nationalities.” Scottish characters, formerly prominent symbols of penury, were soon relegated to brief appearances in golf-related sketches. Irish songs, characters, and themes dwindled to a fraction of their earlier omnipresence. The Dutch/German types fell under the hammer of jingoistic fervor during World War I, and never recovered any significant

⁴⁶⁹ Fairchild 431.

presence.

One might certainly argue, as does James Dormon, that such second-wave immigration types foundered largely because the twentieth-century heirs of those earlier immigrants were “by now divested or coming to be divested of any ethnic taint,” lessening popular culture’s ability to revel in what might be called an “authentic stereotype.” However, the newer Italian, Russian, Jewish, and Polish characters, each drawing upon popular ideations of their related groups, failed to match their predecessors in stage time or similarly rank in the national consciousness. “Social solidarity,” identified by reformer Grover Heubner as the chief goal of the Americanization movement, demanded not only a “uniting of minds and activities of the immigrants with those of the Americans by actual, permanent association” but the “breaking up of race ties.”⁴⁷⁰ This partial incorporation institutionally regimented what Ernest Gellner terms the “interchangeable population” upon which the modern industrial state depends.⁴⁷¹

In noting this passing I do not laud the variety hall’s ethnic performances as paragons of merry pluralism. Clearly, the pieces usually trafficked in fictitious, fixed, and injurious popular fantasies, most of which serviced the aims of the frequently xenophobic native-born populations. Variety entertainment had begun its association with ethnic performance envisioning a world in which “mutual cultural substitutability,” to use Gellner’s phrase, often created a society that prefigured some modern conceptions of ethnic pluralism. Shifting wildly between different modes of operation within the completion of the central narrative, ethnic Others and the American exemplars fought revolutions, fomented mine strikes, and spread American imperialism. The Irish propensity for action ameliorated the difficulties of the

⁴⁷⁰ Huebner 653, 659.

⁴⁷¹ Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1983) 46.

American exemplar's speechifying. The German's earthy guilelessness inoculated his compatriots against the silken allurements of manipulative landlords, mine bosses, and bankers. In the ethnic afterpiece's misappropriation of identity, it had at least preserved the notion of contestable identity itself.

The barely submerged hysteria represented in Fairchild's laundry list of potential cultural contaminants (i.e., "the moral codes of Albania") suggests that Sollors's "index of negative characteristics" continued to inform attempts to locate a non-ethnic core to American identity. Fairchild is, of course, ultimately unable to define his "true American nationality" beyond the slippery descriptors such as "unified," "sturdy," "symmetrical," and "virile." As such, his treatise, like many attempts to delve into the ideological center of the Progressive's "America," intones what Todd Gitlin terms "the cant of identity." Emphasizing the "anxiety created by difference," Gitlin argues that such cant "is frequently a measure of the need to suppress a difficulty or vagueness underneath [and] creates the illusion of firmness where there are only intricacies...."⁴⁷² The attempt to force Othered groups to surrender cultural capital in the pursuit of in-group status therefore often coerced communities with demonstrable cultural boundaries and markers toward a vacuum of personhood, a void that finally offered little more than meaningless sloganeering.⁴⁷³

⁴⁷² Todd Gitlin, "The Cant of Identity," *Theory's Empire: An Anthology of Dissent*, eds. Daphne Patai and Will H. Corral (New York: Columbia UP, 2005) 400.

⁴⁷³ Ernest Gellner bemusedly calculates the ratio of "potential nationalisms" to "effective nationalisms" at 10:1 within the modern industrial state.

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CHAPTER 4

DREAMS OF THE WORLD:” CINEMA AND THE ENERVATION OF VAUDEVILLE SPECTATORSHIP

Vaudeville and film maintained a famously tense relationship throughout their shared history. First introduced into vaudeville in 1896, a few years into the popular theatrical form’s meteoric rise to national prominence, film arrived as an odd herald of Otherness. Its formal closure to productive real-time interaction set it aside from the usual vaudeville act’s hunger for immediate approbation from “the creedless critic—the public.”⁴⁷⁴ Lost, too, in the shift from liveness to the archive represented by cinematic presence was the “element of danger” that one manager found in the more rebellious live acts.⁴⁷⁵ As well, its technological mediation challenged the nature of what many considered “performance” itself, leading one comedian to decry film as “phony” in comparison to the live vaudevillian.⁴⁷⁶

The disjuncture meant many performers found a certain menace accompanying film during its journey through the nightly bill. Metaphors of violence—sometimes simmering, sometimes evident in open attack against “real” performers—ring throughout surviving accounts of film’s encounter with live performance. Tellingly, many recalled the sensation of live performance’s collapse before cinema through running themes of exsanguinations, the liveness that had invigorated vaudeville pooling beneath the now omnipresent screen. One critic saw a lowering medium that

⁴⁷⁴ Harvey Alexander Higgins, Jr., “Breaking Into Vaudeville,” *Shadowland* October 1919: 42.

⁴⁷⁵ Charles Lovenberg, Manager’s Report (Providence), 03 Feb 1903, Keith-Albee Collection, University of Iowa, Iowa City.

⁴⁷⁶ Joe Daniels, “I’ve Got My Own Ideas,” File #8606, The United Vaudeville Artists, Inc. Protected Files, University of Southern California, Los Angeles.

“helped stab the vaudeville industry;”⁴⁷⁷ the next found “vaudeville was literally bled to death by the thing it had despised.”⁴⁷⁸ As Tony Pastor, vaudeville impresario and the single most important figure in its definition and maturation, lingered in illness prior to his 1908 death, one newspaper’s premature obsequy mourned him as the first “Victim of the Nickelodeon.”⁴⁷⁹ He would not, in the eyes of many, be the last.

Earlier, vaudeville had welcomed and even embraced film as part of its variegated bills. Joining foot jugglers, puppet shows, classical violinists, and patter comedians in the genre’s search for variety, novelty, and expertise, film arrived within the vaudeville theatre as a coequal with other technological marvels. It might be argued, as well, that the presence of the increasingly popular motion pictures within vaudeville’s otherwise live performances even prolonged the lifespan of American variety entertainment by many years. The number of legitimate and musical comedy theatrical companies on tour from April through December decreased from an average of 339 companies in 1900 to only 39 companies in 1920.⁴⁸⁰ During this period, both vaudeville and stand-alone cinema experienced phenomenal growth.

In part, this dual rise to success lay in each form’s utility for the other. The stars of the early cinema were its “actualities:” a couple kissing, a deer walking across a field, President McKinley waving to the camera. When audience interest in such simple demonstrations waned, the nascent film industry, not yet possessing the armies of skilled scenarists that would soon arrive to grow the field, turned to vaudeville for its fare. Some of this was out of simple necessity. Vaudeville produced tightly knit, brief acts that were often designed to play in dumbshow, requisite elements for silent

⁴⁷⁷ Sidney J. Paine, “Awaiting Vaudeville’s Return to Local Stage,” *Boston Transcript* 17 Dec. 1938.

⁴⁷⁸ Frank Caverly, “Early Days of Vaudeville in Boston Theaters,” *Boston American* 1931, Harvard Theatre Collection, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

⁴⁷⁹ “Victim of the Nickelodeon,” *Brooklyn Times* 13 Aug. 1908.

⁴⁸⁰ Jack Poggi, *Theater in America: The Impact of Economic Forces, 1870-1967* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1968) 29-45.

shorts. Vaudeville, now a national concern, also had hundreds upon hundreds of acts to set before the cameras. For a film industry that was to discover audience favor demanded new weekly fare, the simple volume provided by filming the apparently numberless vaudeville acts was a salvation. Moreover, the stars of vaudeville brought a ready-made national following to an industry that aspires to grow out of seedy nickelodeon locations to purpose-built cinema palaces.

In vaudeville, the performers found in film a delightfully malleable tool. Though it initially appeared as a means to induce the audience to leave the theatre, film soon captured the attention of the endlessly inventive performers. It was used as a topic in dozens of live sketches, and incorporated in many more early multi-media presentations. It killed time during costume changes, explained dense Wagnerian plots through silent cartoons, and allowed live performers both a canvas and a silent doppelganger against which to perform. Film appeared in music acts, accompanied Shadowgraph jugglers, framed swimming demonstrations, and authenticated displays of notable life-world objects (e.g., a famous bi-plane) on the stage.

Doubtless, then, vaudeville and cinema were aided by their early ability to achieve a symbiotic relationship: cinema gained access to a diverse, national audience and an important early imprimatur of respectability through its appearance in vaudeville halls; vaudeville retained audience members that might otherwise have attended motion picture houses by featuring cinema as one of an evening's many acts. Certainly, vaudeville's ability to embosom a medium so otherwise inimical to its traditions of liveness and reciprocity allowed it to thrive even as fewer and fewer non-variety theatre companies toured the nation in the wake of cinema's growth.⁴⁸¹

Yet, as demonstrated by the previously cited denunciations, vaudeville bore the presence of film with a wariness that eventually burst into recriminating vitriol.

⁴⁸¹ For an instructive calculation of the era's road company strength, see Poggi 29-45.

Economic developments, of course, played a great role in envenoming motion pictures in vaudeville's regard. Having "thrown most of [the vaudevillians] out work" by absorbing their audience, remembered one manager, film eventually reduced the vaudeville playhouse itself to "a pile of dirt and bricks" in which lay only "the prospect of a bigger and brighter movie palace...."⁴⁸² In a like but, to my mind, more profound manner, however, film's infiltration of vaudeville's formerly live performance affected radical changes within an entertainment that had, in the words of one vaudeville magnate, founded itself on "that indescribable quality" that linked the audience and performer in "reciprocity between its heart and hers:" "soul."⁴⁸³

In the following chapter, I wish to pursue the shift in vaudeville's aesthetic occasioned by film's introduction in the late 1890s. Though I understand stand-alone motion pictures (i.e., a film appearing independent of the live performer) to have constituted the preponderance of cinema's presence in vaudeville, I am primarily interested in the resultant shift in spectatorship, not the content-aspect of the films themselves. In part, I choose this distinction in recognition of the well-trod ground of early cinema studies. Robert Allen's still serviceable early history of "media interaction" between early film and classic vaudeville, in particular, provides a reasonable record of vaudeville's business practices in regard to film and the categories of topics usually found in the period's variety theatres.⁴⁸⁴ Additionally, though film's ultimate wresting away of the nation's audiences resulted, in large part, from its low price, it also entered into a period of cultural dominance, I argue, through

⁴⁸² "The Wailing Wall," *The Stage* August 1935.

⁴⁸³ E.F. Albee, qtd. in Higgins 42, 74.

⁴⁸⁴ For the purposes of this project, I define the period of "early film" as 1896-1915, spanning the first popular audiences in vaudeville halls until shortly after the release of the first American feature in 1912. "Classic vaudeville," marked by mature, healthy chains; a national audience; and a dependence upon the live performer, extends until roughly 1920, at which point the increasing presence of film within the bill began to affect fundamental shifts within the genre's economic and aesthetic models. Robert Allen, *Vaudeville and Film, 1895-1915: A Study in Medium Interaction* (New York: Arno Press, 1980).

vaudeville's eager and ultimately foolish willingness to compromise the relationships and modes of productive performance that had ensured vaudeville's own early success. Ever ready to experiment, vaudeville became quickly accepting of the only thing its system proved unable to absorb: inactivity.

The eagerness to let the wolf through the door, I find, was perhaps inevitable. Vaudeville's rapid growth and foundation upon novelty meant that the genre was in perpetual deficit for new presentations. Because of this, it welcomed nearly every type of performance onto its stages. Dance, partner comedy, serio-comic plays, classical monologues, trained animals, fashion displays, celebrity chats, public lectures, intellectualism, and displays of fantastic machinery all had their day upon the late-century vaudeville stage. It was perhaps only inevitable that vaudeville, so sure in its belief that the American audience would always hunger for the live performer and the next big thing, showed a lack of discretion in what competing products it helped sell to its national audience. It was, after all, through the vaudeville playhouse that most Americans first gained familiarity with film. It was in the vaudeville playhouse, as well, that American variety entertainment spectators, that group that had maintained vigorous interactivity and muscular agency even as those within the legitimate theatre sank quietly into their tip-up seats, became habituated to consuming, rather than communally producing culture.

The productive consumer of which I speak depended upon license to assert agency, even when violating the usual unfolding of the performance, during the event of performance, and in a way that altered the performance. Their interaction *completed* certain parts of a performance, even when this re-inscription upon the history of the act was unexpected and never-to-be-repeated. (Witness the previously discussed trick shot artist who was killed mid-performance.) The license to produce was important, however, for in issuing such a standing invitation, and in incorporating

so many avenues for exploring liveness, vaudeville emphasized to its consumers that their simple presence as constituent elements of the performance empowered them to shape the event more fully to their own desires and inclination. This tendency for an audience (and individual spectators) to develop unique “voices” during production of culture was marked. They whistled Sophie Tucker through her song after she forgot the lyrics in her debut performance. They geyed performers whose sloppy acts seemed a waste of their time. They shouted out questions to popular celebrities touring the country on the vaude circuit. More than anything, the audiences navigated the difficult terrain between the rank anarchy of some antebellum theatergoers and the approaching impotency of the cinema spectators. Vaudeville audiences operated by sets of complex and interwoven rules concerning dress, decorum, seat location, act preference and theatre selection, but still managed to frequently challenge the world set before them. It may have been less dramatic than Pastor’s literal flag-waving and call-and-response theatre of the 1860s, but it was also infinitely better suited to Progressive activists who sought to better fit the workings and inclinations of the world to the vast majority of its inhabitants. The ability to produce, rather than simply receive, culture, I believe, therefore abetted the era’s larger endeavors concerning social and economic justice.

The variety culture that evolved into polite vaudeville had previously granted the audience immense powers to alter an act during its production, and in so doing to co-author the cultural event alongside the performers. The relationship between variety performer and spectator, however, was by no means the stuff of merry, co-equal collusion. Indeed, each party had advantages in different areas of the event. On the most basic level, the audience vastly outnumbered the performers, a not inconsiderable advantage in the days when the presence of liquor in all-male halls fueled a rowdy environment. As well, the financial state of the theatre manager in

variety—a sole proprietor in the pre-vaudeville days—suffered far more from a resistant, unhappy audience that might consequently attend the house less regularly than it did from unhappy performers. Yet performers benefited from the pre-calculation of their interaction with the audience and the repetition of any given piece. Though each evening's performance was indeed a unique experience with that given audience, performers had been through the piece with many audiences time and again. They knew the fissures of the piece, the junctures at which the audience might interact, simply because a different house had during a previous performance. The performers thus entered into the bill with a far better idea than the audience of what moments might occasion response or interactivity. In this, they were more ready than the spectators. They were also better armed. As each performance granted the performer another citation of the piece in the larger registry of their experience, it became less and less likely that any given audience could find a wholly unexpected route to interact with the performance. Much like modern stand-up comics who build up a litany of ways to interact with/dismiss/defuse a heckler, the variety performer built up a store of responsive *lazzi*, calculated rejoinders developed over long experience with the piece, given theatre, and genre of performance. The final event produced through this co-authorship was therefore not the result of a singular encounter between performer and spectator. Consequently, one cannot, in the arrival of film, mourn the passing of a form shot through with wholly unique and immediate events.

Certainly, the waxing influence of middle-class decorum, corporate monitoring, and centralized authority through the presence of chains had lessened the ability of mature vaudeville's audience to productively engage with the performance. Yet each of these, as I have previously argued, may also be viewed as important moderating influences on what had often been tempestuous halls ruled through

shouting and placated by jingoism. In achieving a performance style that attempted to govern that which it still acknowledged, and in perfecting a method of corporate “control” that never proved better than haphazard at tamping down resistance, polite vaudeville ensured that live performance could still bear the signature of individual audiences. In so doing, the genre facilitated the ability of Progressive era audiences to model and practice a type of interrogation and interactivity that the nation’s reformers were arguing was crucial to social and economic equity.

I do mean to argue that vaudeville erred in exposing its audience to what would become its deadliest (and ultimately, victorious) competitor for the nation’s soul during leisure hours. Being vaudeville, it could not help but allow the coltish medium to burst into the house and see what the audience might think of it. More unusual types of acts (e.g., puppets singing Verdi, an all-skeleton ragtime band dressed in radium streaked unitards) had played in vaudeville prior to the popularization of film. Part of the strength of the form had been its willingness to incorporate influences and performance traditions as varied as Shakespeare, clog dancing, and mathematics demonstrations. Rather, I argue that those within vaudeville—managers, performers, and spectators alike—all played a part in the genre’s demise by not forcing film to submit to the same gimlet-eyed, merciless gaze with which they had formerly fixed and teased apart every other form they had encountered. All involved with vaudeville had proven marvelously inventive in devising methods of making performance dance to the tune of those within the walls of theatre. That they surrendered the willingness to act, finding instead a benumbed repose in front of the weekly flickers, condemned the genre, I believe, to a death that merely succeeded its irrelevancy. In compromising the vaudeville audience’s ability to meaningfully interact with performers—a capacity wholly absent in viewing film—the genre increasingly eliminated one of the best arguments for its survival.

Most importantly, this leap into docility occurred at the very moment when the interests of finance capitalism, briefly rocked by the shot of Progressive zeal that fired the period from 1895 to 1920, began reconsolidating power. I believe that the rapid marginalization of American socialism during this period and the sidelining of Progressive lions such as Robert La Follette, for example, may be linked to a decline in the socio-cultural interrogation promoted in pre-film vaudeville viewership that was later impossible during film spectatorship. The loss of a genre in which tens of millions of citizens from across all ethnicities, classes, and genders ritualistically exercised real time agency played a great role in this enervation of Progressive zeal.

I therefore build upon my previous arguments concerning popular theatre's audience by locating early appearances of unproductive spectatorship (during variety tableaux and vaudeville posing acts) as important and necessary antecedents to film's ultimate crippling of traditional audience agency within vaudeville. Additionally, I argue that the structure of the vaudeville bill schematized its adoption of film to first favor the live performer and then the motion picture. Economic concerns are not wholly absent from the following treatment; indeed, I hope to turn from the bald facts of ticket prices, print costs, and improvements in production and distribution toward the manner in which an over-valuation of film ultimately seeded vaudeville's demise within its own business model. Perhaps most important, this chapter explores and theorizes a model of reception for the heretofore unexamined conjunction of motion pictures and live performance within the body of single acts. In shaping the ground for what I hope will be later debate, I argue that the intertextuality of such trans-media acts ultimately created a mode of theatricality incommensurate with the strengths of live performance.

As I previously noted, variety, vaudeville's predecessor, valued a remarkably high degree of audience interaction. The male-dominated crowd, often emboldened

by alcohol and met with politically charged fare, regularly gayed performers, interrupted songs, and met certain sentiments with thunderous applause.⁴⁸⁵ “When we bled,” recalled Lew Fields of his days in a roisterous physical comedy duo, “our audiences seemed to like us all the better.”⁴⁸⁶ The freeness and sense of self-definition on the part of the spectator appeared even greater in contrast to the developing code of comportment in the legitimate theatre. “Clipped here and its colorings rubbed off there to conform to the social prejudices” of Europhiliac pretension, one critic felt, non-variety theatre plunged its audiences into a foreign torpor decidedly at odds with “real American life.”⁴⁸⁷ Variety audiences, however, treasured performances that engaged them through “not only meat, but gin and fire.”⁴⁸⁸ In so doing, the form resisted the growing tendency within American performance “to create audiences without the independence to pit their taste, publicly at least, against those of critics, performers, and artists.”⁴⁸⁹ The variety audience benefited immensely from an ability to interrogate, rather than simply receive, a culture whose economic underpinnings were usually at odds with their own interests. The act of asserting productive subjectivity—be it through something as comparatively mild as a catcall or as interruptive as throwing apples at the performer—forced the transmission of culture into a responsiveness often denied to the audience members in matters of salary,

⁴⁸⁵ I do not mean to over-prize variety’s “reflexive” audience as an appropriate model for citizenry within a critical democracy. Issues of mass action and informed viewership aside, any form that employed women so fully in the object/stage position, while largely excluding them from the subject/audience position, holds little claim to a high degree of local, regional or national representation; the exclusion of half the population from the national dialogue throws into question the existence of dialogue itself. In this respect, the nature of interaction in the vaudeville house, requiring a far broader spectrum of Americans, should be viewed as a marked improvement over its forerunner.

⁴⁸⁶ Lew Fields, qtd. in “Parting of Weber & Fields,” 08 May 1904, Weber & Fields Collection, Harry Ransom Humanities Center, University of Texas, Austin.

⁴⁸⁷ Marcus, “The Variety Theatre,” 1882, Variety and Vaudeville Collection, Harvard Theatre Collection, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

⁴⁸⁸ Keating uses the phrase to refer to a turn-of-the-century vaudeville show he finds lacking in this regard. M. J. Keating, Manager’s Report (Boston), 24 Aug. 1903, Keith-Albee Collection, University of Iowa, Iowa City.

⁴⁸⁹ Levine 195.

working conditions, and workplace safety. The concerted, forceful, and corrective actions demanded by these concerns (e.g., strikes), at their base, were emblemized and practiced in active spectatorship.

Even within a mid to late nineteenth century variety playhouse that depended upon sometimes aggressive audience interaction, however, individual scenes would often construct certain moments in such a manner that the audience understood its role to have shifted from participators with the capacity to change an event to consumers charged with appreciating it. Most frequently, this enervation of productive interaction occurred during scenic tableaux within variety afterpieces. Thematically rising *en pointe* in a clear signal to the audience that a moment of summation and pre-ordained significance had arrived, performers assembled themselves in striking poses, rich in allegory and symbolism, while managers filled the stage with picturesque accompanying images and stirring music. “Bunker Hill, or The First Shot for Freedom,” most likely from the mid 1870s, draws the narrative intrigue to a close with George Washington vowing “to wear the victor’s laurel or fill the patriot’s grave. Our success is but a matter of time. We must both ultimately triumph and America shall be in future eyes the giant republic of her universe!” The general, always more statuary than statuesque in his variety hall appearances, finishes the piece surrounded by clouds, standing on center stage pedestal. Thirteen other pedestals, each bearing the seal of an original state and draped in “liberty capes,” flank him. As the inevitable “red fires” rise from the footlights, the orchestra plays “Hail to the Chief” and then “Yankee Doodle Dandy.”⁴⁹⁰ A later piece advocating Irish independence (always a popular topic for the first and second generation immigrants who frequented the variety theatre) finds its *coup de theatre* in a developing series of tableaux:

⁴⁹⁰ “Bunker Hill; or, The First Shot for Freedom,” Tony Pastor Collection, Harry Ransom Humanities Center, University of Texas, Austin.

The Sun of Prosperity rises out of the sea... ray of gold shining on waters.

Temple of Irish Liberty

The Goddess of Irish Liberty--a lady with long, flowing hair, representing

Erin... rises slowly out of the sea amidst a shower of gold.

Fairies grouped in waters.

Red Fire.

Curtain.⁴⁹¹

Such tableaux played four important functions in preparing the American variety tradition to accept the enervation of productive spectatorship that would arrive with projected photographic displays.⁴⁹² First, as Joseph Roach writes, the scenography of the usual composition—lauded individual at the center—reflects “an idealizing schema” to a complicated visual text. The only coherent spectatorial reading of scenes such as Washington’s reinforces the theatre’s “own designs and priorities of value within a hierarchy.”⁴⁹³

Next, tableaux on the variety stage usually purged the defeated party prior to freezing in their static glory. The clear tradition of visual subordination Roach finds in

⁴⁹¹ W. B. Cavauagh, “The Idiot of Killarney, or The Fenion's Oath,” Tony Pastor Collection, Harry Ransom Humanities Center, University of Texas, Austin.

⁴⁹² Tableaux had been a consistent presence in Western theatrical performance for centuries. In many ways, the final moments of the variety afterpiece, with their rheumy-eyed commemoration of the Founding Fathers, shared a lineage with genres as disparate as Stuart court masques and melodrama’s temperance plays. The function of the tableaux in the variety afterpiece, however, functioned in a slightly different fashion than its melodramatic contemporaries. Some melodramatic tableaux arose in response to the silent demands of subterranean realism. Having surrendered some of the more extra-fabular stage pictures to the realistic interior, productions such as the Tom shows, with their heavenly dioramas, used the tableaux as moments to slake the audience’s thirst for grandeur. Other melodrama works, such as W.H. Smith’s *The Drunkard* (1844), used final tableaux as dumbshow representations of the more perfect world created by redemptive action. In the latter case, for example, we are left with music underscoring the vision of the reformed inebriate, his hand upon the Bible, surrounded by family. The variety afterpiece tableaux, in contrast, usually attempted to tie the events of the piece explicitly to grander national tropes: patriotism, liberty, sacrifice, and the freedom provided by westward expansion. The tableaux themselves often had no direct relationship to the strict narrative interests of the plot, but instead sought to create linkage between the relatively minor concerns of the central story (e.g., traveling westward) and the justifying mythos

⁴⁹³ Joseph R. Roach, “Theatre History and the Ideology of the Aesthetic.” *Theatre Journal*, Vol. 41, No. 2 (May 1989) 158.

other tableaux traditions (e.g., master looming over servant) is largely absent within variety. Removed from the disciplining gaze of the audience by the staging hand of the manager, the defeated party (in this case, the haughty British officer who appears throughout the piece) vanishes into the wings, a space of abjection. The variety tableau therefore functions as a text whose incompleteness cripples the spectator's wandering, censoring gaze through lack. The cipher represented by the absent British forces the eye back to the pedestal-topping Washington, the manager's gaze (like that of the later camera) replacing his audience's.

Third, variety authors and managers employed tableaux as summary punctuation of the preceding action. In distinct opposition to their engagement with many other parts of the performance, audience members were neither expected nor encouraged to play within the piece itself. Lines were intended to arouse only cheers. Songs were meant to be accompanied by stomping or singing. Poses were to be applauded. Obstruction of audience agency was particularly strong during tableaux focusing on sanctified historical personae (e.g., Washington) or allegorical figures (e.g., Liberty). Arriving as archetypes, personae combined prefigured ideology with the ethos of the tableaux to allow largely unmolested passage through the audience member's normally interactive reach. Pre-digestion of such characters functioned as a clarion call to admire even as it silenced possible dissent. In a genre of performance that had maintained an ethos valuing a productive audience, tableaux represented brief caesuras for spectatorial agency.

Finally, the elaborate calculation of form and distancing mechanism of the implied frame in pictorial tableaux function as "local networks for subjection and control" of the human bodies they encompassed. The free, coursing, brawling, contentious bodies that had filled the stage prior to the summary tableaux were replaced by figures that might later have been described as animatronics. It is no

surprise that variety performance, though awash in frequent pretensions toward European “class,” eliminated *vivant* from its staging nomenclature. The puckish embrace of liveness that so characterized the rest of the piece was certainly lessened in its means of conclusion. The vaudeville audience that stepped from the 1890s thus took with it a cultural memory of an ominous withdrawal.

And yet, variety afterpiece tableaux, for all their narrative prefiguration and attempts to preclude audience interaction through the shift in viewership models, continued to link performer and spectator within a chronotope of live performance. Audience members, though circumscribed by the pictorial convention of the tableaux, remained capable of interacting across the spatial divide of the apron, and indeed did so throughout much of the rest of the performance; theirs was a spectatorial, not specular, relationship with the stage. Shared time and mutual control over duration of events linked audience member and spectator into a performance whose “only life is in the presence.”⁴⁹⁴ Indeed, the act of performance, to make an analogy to Mikhail Bakhtin’s primarily linguistic concerns, places production of social meaning in motion between simultaneous efforts: the performer, offering forth significance, seeks to pull the audience member into the performative utterance’s “verbal-ideological centralization;” the spectator, reacting against the performer’s centripetal pull, enacts centrifugal force centered on the stage.⁴⁹⁵ The performance thus results in the socially efficacious pluralism of heteroglossia. The resultant culture, inoculated against fascistic uni-vocal tendencies of the monologue, “accommodates all intonations within one voice.”⁴⁹⁶

⁴⁹⁴ Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (New York: Routledge, 1993) 146.

⁴⁹⁵ M.M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, trans. Vadim Liapunov and Kenneth Brostrom, ed. Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982).

⁴⁹⁶ V.N. Voloshinov, “Reported Speech as Index of Social Change,” *The Bakhtin Reader: Selected Writings of Bakhtin, Medvedev, Voloshinov*, ed. Pam Morris (New York: Arnold, 1997) 71.

Though its interrogating style of rejoinder was lessened during the tableaux, the audience nonetheless entered into the collective creation of culture afforded only when the performers and spectators share the same space at a live event, a fact particularly important in a venue so politically charged as the variety hall. In this sense, gatherings in the variety house were not so terribly dissimilar to those occurring in the flourishing labor movement. The liveness of each event provided opportunities to tease out the particular iconography of the tableaux, just as prospective members of a craft union could gather to hear the presentation of particular labor leaders, the former submitting the latter to their disciplining gaze and physical presence. Final audience readings of a tableau tended to be more homogenous than readings of the preceding actions. After all, the moments were meant to serve as coalescing summations to the narrative. Even so, to once again draw upon a useful metaphor from the period's labor organizing, the audience's final communion with the piece functioned as a type of Trade Amalgamation, drawing together disparate functions and views into a communally created point.

Most vaudeville houses appear to have inherited variety's appreciation of heteroglot performance based on a common chronotope. This proved important in a genre whose audiences ranged widely across a working class called to submission and middle class beckoned to politeness. Even managers, bent on exercising whatever control they could against the frequently restive audience, realized that the sensation of agency marked within live performance still represented an irreplaceable, highly attractive element of vaudeville attendance for audiences in the late 1890s and early 1900s. Audiences keenly recognized and reacted against "advances" within the form that sought to displace them from productive positions. Near the turn of the century, a fad for posing acts provided a staging ground for this debate. Living statuary acts narrowed the panoramic gaze required for tableaux vivants onto a relatively small

assemblage of staged figures. Clinging to the supposed educative function of nineteenth-century sacred culture (e.g., opera, Shakespeare), such acts often reproduced “high class” statues or scenes from famous paintings. The Geller Troupe played on a portable, revolving stage, racing from one representation of famous group statuary to the next as they rotated into the audience’s view.⁴⁹⁷ Nirvana and Her Thoroughbred, comprised of a young woman (“quite pretty and of fairly good form”) and a trained stallion (whose form evaded critical remark), took the stage in “a series of tableaux that are about all reproductions of well-known paintings.”⁴⁹⁸ As demonstrated by the reference to Nirvana’s “form,” such acts, like their more risqué counterparts at the Folies Bergère, used a patina of culture to dance close to the boundaries of acceptability. Treloar, a muscular Eugene Sandow knock-off, toured the country with

a sort of a living picture and physical culture exhibition combined. The man, assisted by Edna Tempest, gives posing scene imitation of statuary first, and then exhibits his muscular development.... Then he performs some feats of strength, mainly in lifting [his female assistant], who weighs 148 pounds.”

Treloar’s act depends upon two different models of performance. The latter, in which he lifted his assistant and flexed for the crowd, played with no referent beyond the moment Treloar acted before that particular audience. Though his poses were certainly practiced, they had no responsibility to match the position of an actual statue, and most likely enjoyed incremental but significant changes depending on the type of auditorium, the act that had preceded him, what plane of the stage the manager had given him to play in, etc. As well, the audience’s reaction invariably altered the manner, degree and even selection of the flexes and demonstrations of strength he

⁴⁹⁷ Manager’s Report (Detroit), 08 Dec. 1902, Keith-Albee Collection, University of Iowa, Iowa City.

⁴⁹⁸ Manager’s Report (New York), 07 Sep. 1903, Keith-Albee Collection, University of Iowa, Iowa City

offered. Like any good vaudevillian, he would have played to the crowd. The first part of the act, however, provides a model of vaudeville spectatorship that would be necessary for integration of still and moving photographic projections into the body of the overwhelmingly live bill. Though some discrepancies certainly existed, Treloar's statuary poses were to be judged by how closely they conformed to their cultural referent. The success of the act lay not in the performer's individuation but in his erasure. Indeed, such portions were designed to elicit the greatest applause when they provided the greatest "spur to memory," to use Phelan's phrase.⁴⁹⁹ In turn, spectators asserted themselves only to validate the successful reproduction of a cultural object that preceded and defied their sculpting interaction. High degrees of interaction during Treloar's fixing of each reproduction would, in fact, have frustrated rather than augmented the aim of the act. Managers often noted this withdrawal from interactivity in posing acts that drew upon well-known art, observing, in one case, that while the act failed to get "a great amount of applause during its presentation, it got a tremendous hand at its close."⁵⁰⁰ Such posing acts thus represented a key progression toward a concept of vaudeville performance that, like photography, focused on a referent that lay beyond hope of alteration.

One 1898 sketch recognized and burlesqued this essential disjuncture between fixed statuary and the molten vaudeville show. Three female models entered an artist's studio, "disrobed" behind a screen (they were actually wearing skin-toned fleshlings), and begin posing in a series of the all-too familiar "living pictures." Normally, the existence of the artist and his assistant would have served only to contextualize and justify the poses as impenetrably high art. In this case, as soon as the women struck the first few pictures the men began interjecting lurid commentary

⁴⁹⁹ Phelan, *Unmarked* 146.

⁵⁰⁰ Manager's Report (New York), 07 Sep. 1903, Keith-Albee Collection, University of Iowa, Iowa City

between their poses.⁵⁰¹ Such remarks served to both foreground the women as sexual objects and re-place them in the chronotopic reality of the live performance. In essence, the comic and straight man enacted the role of interruptive audience members, commandeering the intentions of the posing and forcibly refashioning it from a piece of tasteful high culture into a turn so prurient that one review scolded it as a “shameful show.”⁵⁰² Additionally, the act genders the approaching viewership model necessary for consuming film within an understanding of the female object. As Alison Kibler has noted, male performers, reviewers, managers and audience members often framed polite vaudeville, famously referred to by manager Tony Pastor as “Frenchified and sissy,” as a feminized derivative of the more robust variety.⁵⁰³ Engaging in a mode of spectatorship harkening back to comparatively aggressive mid to late nineteenth-century popular theatre, the two men enact a phallocentric critique of the advancing ethos of audience withdrawal.

Audiences sometimes directly reclaimed agency from acts which seemed to celebrate its erasure. Near the turn of the century, an act entitled “Motogirl” had the entire East Coast abuzz. The lead actress played a mechanized human so adeptly, Keating reported that “the majority of the audience seemed to be dazed as to whether it was an automaton or human being.”⁵⁰⁴ Philadelphia manager H.A. Daniels, alerted to the salability of the mystery, featured Motogirl as his headliner two weeks later, advertising it “heavily and as a mystifying act.” The resultant packed house presented an insurmountable problem. The allure of the turn lay in the mystique surrounding her true identity. That is, it was not the skill with which she performed that made the hit

⁵⁰¹ Newspaper review, Oct. 1898, Variety and Vaudeville Collection, Harvard Theatre Collection, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Folder # 1.

⁵⁰² *New York Sun* 21 Sep. 1898.

⁵⁰³ See Chapter 2 of Alison Kibler, *Rank Ladies: Gender and Cultural Hierarchy in American Vaudeville* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1999) for a fuller discussion of “feminized” vaudeville.

⁵⁰⁴ M. J. Keating, Manager’s Report (Boston), 12 Jan. 1903, Keith-Albee Collection, University of Iowa, Iowa City.

but the resultant uncertainty concerning her humanity. The audience, however, was accustomed to demanding an encore appearance after so lavishly bestowing its favor—if only for bows and a short curtain speech. Motogirl could not respond to the curtain call without destroying the mystery, and thus the “buzz,” and thus her marketability. “We asked [Stage] Manager Melville not to give the act away with curtain calls and simply put down the curtain with the Motogirl in the center of the stage,” a frustrated Daniels informed the central office. The move “successfully mystified the audience,” he concluded. Thwarted in their desire to force a performer to answer their summons, however, the mystified but unhappy audience judged the curtain dropping “a very bad and slow finish for the act.”⁵⁰⁵ By the time she reached New York two weeks later she had surrendered to the audience. Though the New Yorkers remained as “bewildered in regard to the act” as folks in other towns, Motogirl finally found herself “obliged to come out and bow after the card for the succeeding act was put out.” Manager Hodgdon wistfully wrote, “I think the majority of them up to the time the girl spoke were of the impression that it was really a machine.”⁵⁰⁶ Exposed, Motogirl faded from vaudeville at the end of the season.

The managers, of course, would have preferred that Motogirl not say a word throughout her tenure in each of their towns. The mystery surrounding her (in)humanity had become a great point for word-of-mouth advertising throughout the week. The circuit would have preferred she never spoke at all, building up the vexing question as she hit all of its major houses. Predictably, the vaudeville audience had a very different idea about precisely who owned its house and in what manner one would operate: any act that stepped onto the stage entered into a communal

⁵⁰⁵ H.A. Daniels, Manager’s Report (Philadelphia), 09 Feb. 1903, Keith-Albee Collection, University of Iowa, Iowa City.

⁵⁰⁶ S. K. Hodgdon, Manager’s Report (New York), 23 Feb. 1903, Keith-Albee Collection, University of Iowa, Iowa City.

relationship with it and fell under its influence. The audience clearly eschewed an aesthetic vocabulary for an act attempting to situate itself so completely apart from its auditors. In the showdown that followed—one that embroiled theatre managers, performers, audience members, advertising personnel and poor stage manager Melville—spectators simply forced all involved parties to return to an aesthetic that prized a powerful and interactive audience. Only the real-time/real-space chronotope of live performance enabled such a *coup de main*.

Terry Eagleton’s wonderment “that Bakhtin spilt so much ink just to tell us we should listen to one another [and] be prepared to be corrected and interrupted” (meant as a wry aside impugning the linguist’s American idolaters), impishly glances past the salutary nature of such disruption within the encroaching massification of the late nineteenth-century.⁵⁰⁷ As I have argued elsewhere, the ethos of vaudeville presumed a degree of co-agency between spectator and performer remarkable for its period in American theatre history. This ability to meaningfully act, however, was ultimately highly dependent upon the liveness and frustration of repeatability represented by the theatrical chronotope. Performance seeking to create meaning through reciprocal assertion, as Peggy Phelan notes, cannot “participate in the representation *of* representations,” but must “resist the laws of the reproductive economy....”⁵⁰⁸ Equally important, as Bakhtin argues, “responsible” acts, those resulting in productive, self-annunciatory subjectivity, may only move forward through a “value orientation” that links the discrete subject to its exterior world. The link between intentionality and the subject fosters “answerability;” it demands that the agent claim the act as a purposeful interaction with the non-I. (Here we encounter Bakhtin’s oft-cited image of the signature upon a document.) In so doing, interactivity such as was demonstrated in

⁵⁰⁷ Terry Eagleton, qtd. in Tom Cohen, “The Ideology of Dialogue: The Bakhtin/De Man (Dis)Connection,” *Cultural Critique* (Spring 1996) 41.

⁵⁰⁸ Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (New York: Routledge, 1993) 146.

vaudeville performance simultaneously collapsed yet maintained the chasm between I and Other. For Bakhtin, a highlighting of intent within what Phelan calls the “ontology of performance” becomes crucial to understanding performance not simply as transgressive but progressive. Like the myriad theses-driven reforms of vaudeville’s Progressive Era, responsible acts seek a world reflexively engaged with the needs, desires, pleasures and interests of its constitutive elements. Pleasing acts are whooped back through encores. Unpopular political characterizations are catcalled off the stage. The stubborn silence of a nonplussed house chases the act out of headliner status and sometimes out of a job. Lacking this intentionality, irresponsible acts compound upon one another, creating a radical disjuncture between desire and existence. Thus, a world of irresponsible, unsigned acts develops “immanently” in regard to its constituents. When an audience’s signature could be read by no performer it meant nothing. Box office figures alone signaled approbation.

The valuation of reflexively maintained subjectivity, vaccine against injurious immanent bodies, problematized ready adoption of still and moving photographic presentation into vaudeville, but does not wholly account for its relatively late entrance. Technical issues certainly played their part. Popular theatre proved unable to reliably project photographs with any competency until the early 1890s. Electrified, like the streetcars that now ceaselessly ferried patrons to their ticket windows, vaudeville theatres took advantage of the increasingly bright and reliable incandescent bulb to project fantastic views upon screens and cycloramas that often ran the length of the stage. Though vaudeville’s aesthetic centered on the relationship between the spectator and live performer, its relatively swift incorporation of photographic projection is not surprising. First, audience members were not wholly without means to apprehend the phenomena. Earlier nineteenth-century fads such as the painted cyclorama (a 360-degree painting displayed in gargantuan, often purpose-built halls)

and the moving panorama (a lengthy painted scene that scrolled laterally across the stage while fixed on two spools) had helped establish modes of spectacle viewership within American popular culture.⁵⁰⁹ As well, vaudeville's voraciousness prompted it to adopt almost any new offering that did not egregiously violate its public professions of decorous culture. Its idolization of the "up-to-date" also made it a natural ally for displays of technological innovation. (The turn of the century vogue for Motogirl-like automatons, for example, was followed by a number of acts in late vaudeville's revolving around automobiles, airplanes and radios.)

Surviving weekly reports also indicate managers welcomed photographic projections to the vaudeville house as part of a new search to reestablish structure with their evolving genre. In March 1885, manager B.F. Keith introduced the continuous performance format, in which the day's bill would begin running at 10 A.M. and continue an uninterrupted cycle of performance until 11 P.M.⁵¹⁰ In theory, it was possible for one to enter the theatre in the morning and remain until long after the evening street cars had been cleared back to the switching yard. In practice, however, this would have proven ruinous for the theatre owners, most of whom had adopted continuous performance as a means of drawing upon the itinerant shoppers whose footsteps later enchanted Jane Jacobs. Andrew Erdman, repeating the overly enthusiastic "truism that 'nothing draws a crowd like a crowd,'" fails to appreciate that in low-priced, urban theatres newly dependent upon rapid turn-over of audience, nothing prevented a seat being sold like it being occupied by the previous tenant.⁵¹¹ In

⁵⁰⁹ In particular, I would argue the moving panorama established a radically new vocabulary for the sometimes rigorously active audience member. In a form that offered the "thrill of watching the environment move"—an experience lost to post-Renaissance audiences—spectators conceptualized their roles as partly being defined by immobility. Lance Brockman, "Setting the Stage for Motion Pictures," *On the Edge of Your Seat: Popular Theatre and Film in Early Twentieth-Century American Art*, ed. Patricia McDonnell (New Haven: Yale UP, 2002) 97-100.

⁵¹⁰ Keith abandoned the continuous format in 1906, but not before others, notably Proctor, had adopted and adapted it.

⁵¹¹ Andrew Erdman, *Blue Vaudeville: Sex, Morals and the Mass Marketing of Amusement, 1895-1915*. (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2004) 45.

wooing the spontaneous attendee, who might not have set out for the theatre but wound up there all same, continuous vaudeville managers were benefiting from what Richard Butsch rightly identifies as a new “life built upon consumption.”⁵¹² While continuous vaudeville offered an egalitarian public face—the flexibility of one’s employment schedule became less important; tickets were more plentiful and relatively inexpensive—managers frantically attempted to retain subterranean control over the apparent freedoms embedded in a business model in which “even temporal boundaries became anachronistic.”⁵¹³

Economic consideration drove the search to convey the appearance of a structured bill within the continuous performance, but other factors contributed to this retrenchment in predictability. Some managers discovered that continuous performance placed them in competition against more regularly scheduled events and the hardiness or capriciousness of the consumer. One beleaguered turn-of-the-century manager, for example, decided to return to three-a-day performances after first a visiting circus and then an unexpected rainstorm decimated his week’s receipts.⁵¹⁴ The need to maintain the structure of a traditional bill within the seemingly inhospitable framework of a revolving performance also betrayed the struggle between economics and art represented by continuous vaudeville. Managers, many of whom were former performers and all of whom spent countless hours tinkering with the sequencing and staging of the acts, knew that the vaudeville show, far from being a haphazard assortment of unallied turns, benefited from the highly educated structural sense of

⁵¹² Richard Butsch, *The Making of American Audiences: From Stage to Television, 1750-1990* (New York: Cambridge UP, 2000) 112.

⁵¹³ Elaine S. Abelson, “The City as Playground: Culture, Conflict, and Race,” rev. of *Going Out: The Rise and Fall of Public Amusements*, by David Nasaw, *American Quarterly* 48.3 (1996) 525.

⁵¹⁴ M. J. Keating, Manager’s Report (Boston), 08 Jun.1903, Keith-Albee Collection, University of Iowa, Iowa City.

“the showman in charge.”⁵¹⁵ One composed a performance much like a symphony, allowing it to ebb during the quieter middle movements of posing acts or lectures and crest with the frequently thunderous slap-dash of the headliner. Managers intuitively recognized that the revolving nature of continuous vaudeville, even as it helped create sales, weakened their ability to reliably create pleasure through structure.

They began by attempting to retain an awareness of a structured bill within the continually revolving performance. Some managers initially tried to publicize a fairly predictable schedule within what had been billed as an agreeably shapeless day. Within a few years of introducing continuous vaudeville, the Keith-Albee chain printed up small, cardboard business cards each week that contained the approximate starting time for each four hour run through the bill. Some Keith managers, hoping to inspire continued patronage, included the next week’s bill on the schedule.⁵¹⁶ Each week, then, patrons could pick up a fresh card and plan attendance to coincide with the approximate beginning of a bill.⁵¹⁷ As with the rise of railroad schedules and international time standards in the late nineteenth century, schedule cards in continuous vaudeville attempted to annihilate unproductive chance.⁵¹⁸ Continuous vaudeville might have made great noise about providing spectators a “graceful retreat” from increasingly over-scheduled daily lives, but management’s dependence on regularly clearing seats for new patrons ultimately made it a coconspirator in a “wider

⁵¹⁵ Brooks McNamara, “Scenography of Popular Entertainment,” *The Drama Review: TDR*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (Mar., 1974) 19.

⁵¹⁶ Schedule card, Keith’s (Boston), 1923, Harvard Theatre Collection, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Folder #3.

⁵¹⁷ Avaricious to a fault, vaudeville theatres often turned around and charged a premium price to reserve seats, forcing the patrons to pay extra for the very regularity for which managers hungered. Price bumps in the early 1900s could add a dime to a ticket already costing a quarter-dollar.

⁵¹⁸ When audience members could not be made to plan their visits and digest the bill in its intended order, management hoped that the second appearance of the first act witness by each individual audience member would signal the occasion to leave. B.F. Keith, “The Vogue for Vaudeville,” ed. Charles Stein, *American Vaudeville as Seen by its Contemporaries* (New York: Knopf, 1984) 16. See Mary Ann Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, The Archive*. (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2002) 4-9 for a discussion of institutionalized time management in the late nineteenth-century.

cultural concern with order as a means of creating maximum regularity and predictability of results.”⁵¹⁹ The problem of urging an audience’s exit only grew worse as continuous vaudeville grew in structural complexity. Playing at up to twelve hours and five turns, continuous vaudeville often featured two entirely different bills. Acts that drew fewer audience members or thought to be of a less remarkable nature played the first, third, and fifth shows, turns through the bill that less frequently attracted the attractive middle class patrons. More featured and skilled acts played the second and fourth shows, catching mothers in the matinees and the dinner-and-dancing crowd in the early evening. Continuous performance therefore offered the possibility of several hours of entertainment and up to eighteen acts to any audience member with the requisite endurance.

Management thus found itself faced with two interrelated challenges. First, continuous vaudeville wished to provide the sensation of a suspended action at the end of each turn through the bill even as it continued to perform. In effect, continuous performance, seeking to drive out consumers who had already had one run through a bill, had to find a way to make “nothing happen” in a form of vaudeville whose drawing card was ceaseless activity. Next, having lost the post-bill orchestral accompaniment when it adopted a twelve hour run, the form had to discover a new means to cover an audience’s often noisy exit or entrance.

Enter the “chaser,” a dumb act placed at the end of a bill’s rotation. The etymology of the term remains uncertain, but has nonetheless inflected upon our reception of the acts in important ways, often to the detriment of early popular cinema. For decades after vaudeville’s collapse, former performers, knowing that film, a former chaser, had helped kill the genre, remembered a bill’s final acts as those that

⁵¹⁹ Leo Charney, “In Order: Fragmentation in Film and Vaudeville,” *On the Edge of Your Seat: Popular Theatre and Film in Early Twentieth-Century American Art*, ed. Patricia McDonnell (New Haven: Yale UP, 2002) 111.

had “chased out audiences when nothing else would.”⁵²⁰ Certainly, some chasers come down through reviews and management descriptions in less than scintillating fashion. One gentleman, for example, slowly poured colored sand down an inclined board to create two-dimensional profiles of famous presidents. Some turns inadvertently descended into the ranks of the chasers through sheer incompetence. Culver’s Cycle Loop, a formerly successful trick bicycle act, plummeted through favored spots until it finally ended up as the chaser at Hyde & Behman’s Brooklyn house, provoking the irate manager to reclassify it “a very much overpaid act.”⁵²¹

Though many chasers were undoubtedly of poor quality, there is little evidence that managers or chains intentionally booked acts it felt would fare poorly. It remained in management’s best interest, as booker George Gottlieb pointed out, to send “the audience home pleased with the program to the last minute.”⁵²² Indeed, chasing itself became a specialty. Though acts performing to entering and exiting audience members “see a lot of haircuts,” as Joe Laurie, Jr. remembered, they excelled in dumb performance styles as varied as trick roping, club juggling, tumbling, and high wire walking.⁵²³ Other acts, such as “a Japanese troupe with their gorgeous kimonos and vividly harmonizing stage draperies,” assumed a statelier but no less pleasing air.⁵²⁴

Even when they were of decent quality, however, chasers were understood by both audience and manager alike to matter less than other acts within vaudeville, if

⁵²⁰ Caverly “Early Days.”

⁵²¹ The reassignment of acts into the chaser position, increasingly understood to signal the end of the performance, also allowed managers a means to hide acts already under contract from closer audience attention. Manager’s Report (Brooklyn), 04 May.1903, Keith-Albee Collection, University of Iowa, Iowa City.

⁵²² George Gottlieb, “Psychology of the American Vaudeville Show from the Point of View of its Managers,” ed. Charles W. Stein, *American Vaudeville as Seen by it’s Contemporaries* (New York: Knopf, 1984) 181.

⁵²³ Joe Laurie, Jr., *Vaudeville: From the Honky-Tonks to the Palace* (New York: Henry Holt, 1953) 20, 22-38.

⁵²⁴ Gottlieb 179.

only because the convention of their structural placement signaled to the audience that the moment of disengagement had arrived. Almost invariably playing in dumb show, chasers could be spoken over, in part, because many audience members conceived of the final act as lying outside the proper bill. Audiences collected their belongings, made dinner plans with compatriots, and evaluated the recently completed headlining act. Acrobat Joe E. Brown (later known for taking Jack Lemmon as his fiancé in “Some Like It Hot”) held that during his chasing years “it was not unusual for us to start our act with half the audience on the way out.”⁵²⁵ (Brown popped up in one Chicago review only with the brief notice he “came on to the accompaniment of departing footsteps.”⁵²⁶) Indeed, acts dependent on audience interaction found life as chaser made for a miserable week. When some spoken comedy acts descended to the chaser position after failing to please in a Monday matinee, for example, they invariably earned only scattered laughter from an audience that had terminated its productive presence. The ideal chaser therefore filled the time of egress and space of the stage while demanding little to no assertion of agency on the part of its spectators.

It is therefore unsurprising that early, stand-alone projection of still photographs in the vaudeville house, first appearing with national regularity in the mid-1890s, invariably appeared in the chaser position. Usually running anywhere from fifteen to twenty minutes, such turns often displayed travelogue slides quite close to those Tony Pastor had displayed on the street in a covered wagon more than a half century before.⁵²⁷ Clearly, though the slides played their role as amiable distraction, they also carried the educative pretensions of rural Chautauqua into urban arenas in much the same fashion that hand-held stereo-scopes had carried international

⁵²⁵ Joe E. Brown as told to Ralph Hancock, *Laughter is a Wonderful Thing* (New York: A.S. Barnes and Co., 1956) 126.

⁵²⁶ Jack Lait, qtd. in Brown 126.

⁵²⁷ Allen, *Vaudeville and Film*, 60-61.

journalism into the living room.⁵²⁸ Yet the views of mountain glaciers and the like, though increasing in technical execution, artistic imagination, and brilliance of projection, proved among the least remarkable, least popular chasers. Without exception, managers permanently consigned projected photographs to the final, overlooked spot on the bill, even while other dumb acts—such as equilibrists—managed to claw their way into more prestigious spots in performance.

Their reports on the photographs understand the only non-live portion of the bill as a coda to the actual performance, a structural necessity to arrive back at the focus of the genre, the vaudevillian. Managers' devaluation of photography as a point for audience favor led their reports, so exacting and detail-oriented when addressing live acts, to assume a tone of tepid generality in their assessment of the slides: "better than usual," "about the same," "good selection," "disappointing," etc. Usually, even the best projections could hope for nothing better than one manager's weak offering that they are "at least a good deal better than many of the poor acts we are obliged to play."⁵²⁹ Later, the same manager, though admitting he had been sent "an interesting lot of views," cut the projections from several of the day's performances. Looking over dressing rooms packed with vaudevillians, he concluded, "I have plenty of show without it."⁵³⁰

In spite of their cool reception in the vaudeville house, projected photographs shifted vaudeville spectatorship in three radical ways. First, the preferred subject matter (e.g., fjords, parades) provided an entrance for spectacle into a genre that had

⁵²⁸ It is worth noting that "Circuit Chautauqua," a rotating weekly arrangement of daily bills, began in 1904, the same period during which corporate vaudeville began to consolidate its holdings and standardize yearly contracts. Taken together, the flowering of these circuits represents the clear influence of standardizing movements (such as Taylorization) within formerly freer, more localized assemblages of American popular entertainments.

⁵²⁹ M. J. Keating, *Manager's Report* (Boston), 11 May 1903, Keith-Albee Collection, University of Iowa, Iowa City.

⁵³⁰ M. J. Keating, *Manager's Report* (Boston), 03 Aug. 1903, Keith-Albee Collection, University of Iowa, Iowa City.

prided itself on flexible staging and a frequently intimate, productive relationship between performer and audience member.⁵³¹ Spectacles such as the fjords, now doubly frozen in their photographic fixity, ensured, as Guy Debord notes, a “self-movement” that

arrogates to itself everything that in human activity exists in a fluid state so as to possess it in a congealed form—as things that, being the *negative expression* of living value, have become exclusively abstract value. In these signs, we recognize our old enemy the commodity....⁵³²

The eternally mutable, irrevocably irreproducible personhood offered by the live performer thus falls in the “war waged to make it impossible to distinguish goods from commodities....”⁵³³ Managers tacitly acknowledged the commodification of photographic projections in their continual use of a product that defied the ready connoisseurship normally recorded in such explicit detail in their report books: even radically different photographs were “about the same.”⁵³⁴ Conversely, continuous vaudeville highlighted qualitative distinction for its performers with the two rotating bills of differing value. Photographs, indistinguishable fillers of the odd place in the bill, fell where they may.

⁵³¹ Other reason encouraged vaudeville’s preference for these two general subjects. Continued difficulties in adequately lighting interior subjects made exterior pictures and shots of large groups (which required less fine detail) far easier to adequately produce and satisfactorily project. In addition, because few acts traveled with overwhelmingly large sets, such projections stood out for their dramatic increase in scale from the human performer. Like earlier panoramas, they could consume the frontal plane of the stage. Satisfying vaudeville’s hunger for the new and unique, projections exploited their inimitable gift for large-scale representation with views of mountains, fjords, the Rialto, and Yellowstone Park. Allen, *Vaudeville and Film* 62-63.

⁵³² Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1994) 26.

⁵³³ Debord 30.

⁵³⁴ One cannot help but be drawn to Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer contention, “That the difference between the Chrysler range and General Motors products is basically illusory strikes every child with a keen interest in varieties.” Vaudeville managers usually could not even operate in a range of qualitative distinction that allowed them to “perpetuate the semblance ... of a range of choice.” Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Continuum, 1995) 121.

Too, the reproduced photographs projected on vaudeville screens began to erode the genre's important emphasis on authenticity during performance. Denying the Benjaminian "aura" that marks the performing subject as unique, acts of reproduction such as the photograph introduced into vaudeville "performances" wholly divorced from the "domain of tradition" carried by the performing body. I forge here a relationship with Walter Benjamin's notion of an "ownership" of artistic objects that provides an "historical testimony" during the enunciating act of aesthetic engagement with its subject.⁵³⁵ The vaudevillian, after all, functioned as a repository of audience favor or disapproval accreted during previous trips; each return engagement added a sedimentary layer of performance history. Following a 1911 performance by Willa Holt Wakefield, she of the "dainty characterizations," the local reviewer admitted that Wakefield was "not unknown" in town, having performed there several times, but enthused that "each time adds rather than diminishes the warmth of her welcome."⁵³⁶ Audiences themselves gathered histories through famously adopting some acts, demanding that others "go back to the woods," and pleading with others to get fresher or more locally relevant material.⁵³⁷

Third, the fundamentally different formal position of such media required a new way of witnessing the act as both spectator and critic, a manner that finally demanded absenting oneself from the communal production of a cultural object. As with the motion pictures that would succeed them, these views existed completely outside the productive agency of the audience.⁵³⁸ No amount of guying, whistling or

⁵³⁵ Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt. (New York: Schocken, 1968) 220, 221, 223.

⁵³⁶ "At the Orpheum," Pat Rooney II Collection, Harry Ransom Humanities Center, University of Texas, Austin: File #C-1.

⁵³⁷ I depart from Benjamin by lauding what he criticizes as art's traditionally "parasitical dependence on ritual." As Albert McLean has argued, vaudeville's ability to present a "redemptive vision" through the ritual of its performance was one of its primary and socially efficacious facets. Benjamin 224. Albert F. McLean, Jr., *American Vaudeville as Ritual* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1965) 41.

⁵³⁸ It is also helpful to view the formal structure of photographic projections as a microstructural analogue to the actual vaudeville bill, mostly for the contrast provided. The formal interstices in such a

rushing of the stage could transform the commodified object into anything beyond or against that form in which they had arrived at the theatre. This shift in “methods of discourse” between the live theatre and photographic projection, as critic Vilem Flusser notes in regard to public photography, helped begin a shift in vaudeville spectatorship from personal “responsibility” to “massification.”⁵³⁹

Managers and audiences alike appear to have conceptualized early motion pictures in vaudeville as a radical evolutionary advance on the static images.⁵⁴⁰ Whereas the stereopticon managed to cobble together a selection of stolid views “appropriate to Washington[‘s] birthday anniversary,”⁵⁴¹ the early film powerhouse Vitagraph offered “the Bunker Hill parade, . . . including a capital picture of the Liberty Bell, which was drawn in the procession by 13 horses and escorted by a detachment....”⁵⁴² Just as the static visual projections had played to its strengths with an interest in fixed panoramic views the new medium was learning to differentiate itself through focusing its lens on particularly kinetic events: parades, marching soldiers and a national icon wending its way through the streets past waving throngs. Static photographic projections continued to play vaudeville until its demise in the

photographic bill (i.e., the moments at which one slide changed to the next) ceased to provide junctures during which either audiences or operators could interrogate the action or the greater formal rigidity. We may most clearly observe this shift in considering the changeover from one act to the next as an analogue for the change between one slide and the next. In the former case, we have seen how the audience could inflate the “space between,” charging it with meaning and enacting agency. (Think of the New York house delaying the act succeeding Motogirl so that she might be forced to address them as a human.) The interstitial space during the slide presentations collapsed into mere caesuras. Audiences could distend the temporal flow of the piece by applauding loudly for a particular view but could not stage any action outside of simple appreciation or rejection. A vaudeville audience’s expanded spectating schema thus had to include a new position of repose.

⁵³⁹ Vilem Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, trans. Anthony Matthews (London: Reaktion, 2000) 50.

⁵⁴⁰ Static images still had one advantage over motion pictures: color. Hand-tinted slides showing scenes such as the English countryside or North American glaciers received special notice from managers and audiences alike. M.J. Keating, Manager’s Report (Boston), 01 Dec. 1902, Keith-Albee Collection, University of Iowa, Iowa City.

⁵⁴¹ M.J. Keating, Manager’s Report (Boston), 23 Feb. 1903, Keith-Albee Collection, University of Iowa, Iowa City

⁵⁴² M.J. Keating, Manager’s Report (Boston), 22 Jun. 1903, Keith-Albee Collection, University of Iowa, Iowa City

early 1930s, a point confirmed by the continued presence of acts whose turns called for such projection capabilities in a theatre.⁵⁴³ Yet films, particularly those by the Biograph Company, appeared to be gradually replacing its forbearer in both the interest of the audience and thus in vaudeville's single most important advertising medium: word of mouth.⁵⁴⁴

To use the distinction drawn by one manager regarding a particularly long-running bill, fixed projections were becoming that which, "when once seen . . . gives satisfaction" but "makes the show weak, from the standpoint of drawing money into the house."⁵⁴⁵ This dangerous lack of drawing power impacted the ability of static visual displays to even get seen. Despite Stereoscope's "interesting" views, Keating commented after a long day in 1903, it was "only used twice as I had plenty of show without it."⁵⁴⁶ In a medium accustomed to the sometimes tense tug-of-war between managers (who constructed the bill and helped book the acts) and the audience (who patronized the efforts and provided free advertising) it appeared the latter was slowly pulling away the former away from static projections towards motion pictures.⁵⁴⁷

⁵⁴³ Renton's 1918 instructions to prospective theatre owners suggests placing fixed and motion cinema projectors side by side in a booth. Even here, however, we find Renton's suggestion that the importance of film to a vaudeville bill, as well the delicacy and flammability of the celluloid, should rule the selection of its tender, an "intelligent and efficient" servant to vaudeville's new master. Renton 161.

⁵⁴⁴ Absolved from any consideration of a live audience, commercial advertising stolidly understood both genres of photographic projection to be basically alike. They were sold alongside one another in the same store, shared the same catalogue pages and rented in the same fashion. Robinson 71.

⁵⁴⁵ Manager's Report (Providence), 13 Oct. 1902, Keith-Albee Collection, University of Iowa, Iowa City.

⁵⁴⁶ M.J. Keating, Manager's Report (Boston), 03 Aug. 1903, Keith-Albee Collection, University of Iowa, Iowa City.

⁵⁴⁷ One must not ignore the very real economic differences between booking a film and booking live acts. As film production and distribution improved such distinction played a great role in the death of vaudeville. However, as Marsh has noted, early film acts cost houses about as much per week as a middling live act. Economics aside, the new medium actually seems to have been far more vexing than live performers to managers. Whereas managers discussed the infrequent intoxicated performer and far more common demanding diva with a certain paternal bemusement films often drove them into paroxysms of frustration and rage. They could *do* something about the performers; once the films refused to work correctly they fell completely beyond the manager's grasp and expertise. Marsh 18.

It seems to have taken vaudevillians until the end of the century's first decade to be incorporating moving picture into their turns with any great regularity. Unfamiliar with the new medium and distrustful of its fitful growing pains, performers leapt with full force only after several concerns had been addressed. First, performers had to be assured that all of the stops on their tour would have the necessary projection equipment and that such equipment would conform to the standards of their films. Early on, most vaudeville houses did not even maintain a film projector as a permanent part of the theatre, but instead received film as one more traveling act on a weekly basis: a projector, accompanied by a stewarding projectionist, would arrive at the theatre to play the week's "views." (Countless hours on the road can hardly have done much to preserve the temperament of the infamously finicky equipment.) As had been the case with the earlier confrontations around railroad gauge, early film suffered from a nearly fratricidal aversion to standardized format for films and their projectors. For either a theatre or an act to commit to one format involved a host of irrevocable choices involving film speed, sprocket hole shape, and the electrical current needed to drive the machine. Well into the first decade of the twentieth-century most vaudeville theatres, wary of the initial expense of the projector and unable to maintain the profoundly temperamental piece of equipment, did not own their own film projectors. Unless they were willing to purchase and maintain their own equipment, performers had little ability to integrate film with live performance.

Vaudeville's own obsession with the trappings of politeness, most widely circulated through its own varied public relations efforts, also moved to curtail theatre-owned projectors. Some early distributors of film, echoing vaudeville's public obsession with the respectable audience as a framing device, attempted to control the placement of equipment. The Vitascope Company, an early powerhouse, had sought entry into Keith's bills in 1896 both because he had been "very successful wherever he

has houses of amusement,” according to one manager of the film company, and because his houses had sterling reputations amidst middle class patrons. In pushing one franchisee toward Keith, the Vitascope manager cautioned

In making contracts [to sell projectors], we would advise you to be very careful not to get the machine in irresponsible hands or into second-class theatres or amusement houses, as the success of the machine will largely depend upon the place where it is shown.⁵⁴⁸

Efforts to ensure that this new form, still struggling to mature from curiosity into artistic medium, stepped into a cultural vale ruled by “rationalizing discourses” such as professionalism cannily reframed “cinema as a business:” when observed by managerial and professional classes, cinema, now a “civic partner,” could operate freed from the “moral discourses invoked by members of the clergy and reform societies alike.”⁵⁴⁹

Even after projectors could be reliably found in most vaudeville houses, it appears that the unreliability of the equipment continued to make vaudevillians wary. In 1902, six years after Keith’s chain began widespread display of films within its continuous bills, managers were still plagued by a host of technical difficulties, any one of which could spell trouble to their rolling presentations. Fumed one

The show was greatly hurt by the inability of the Biograph people to perform their work. For two weeks I have been at them anticipating some trouble, and felt that I had forestalled any possible accident but after promising me that they would be ready to give a performance today, at the last moment they failed.

As a consequence the entire show was delayed 20 or 25 minutes.⁵⁵⁰

⁵⁴⁸ Raff to R.S. Paine, May 2, 1896, qtd. in Allen, *Vaudeville and Film* 93.

⁵⁴⁹ William Uricchio and Roberta E. Pearson, “Manhattan’s Nickelodeons: New York? New York!” *Cinema Journal* 36, No. 4 (Summer 1997)101.

⁵⁵⁰ M.J. Keating, Manager’s Report (Boston), 27 Jul. 1903, Keith-Albee Collection, University of Iowa, Iowa City.

Keating complained of the competing Vitascope product the same year, blaming poor lenses for the grim turn. “They gave us a most unsatisfactory exhibition,” he informed Albee.⁵⁵¹ As former theatre owner Edward Renton notes, vaudeville artists suffered greatly from the usual tics of the road: luggage that failed to arrive before a show, missed rehearsals because of late trains, rehearsal music inadvertently packed in later-arriving trunks, etc.⁵⁵² They scarcely could have constructed the many integrated acts vaudeville saw after 1910 had they been forced to rely upon the same technically unreliable medium of the previous decade, nor would managers have been likely to allow a greater percentage of their bill to become prey to mechanical whims. The gradual disappearance from the managers’ reports of such formerly common fulminations speaks to a heightened state of technical competency by the end of the decade. This is confirmed by the sudden flowering of turns featuring a combination of live acts and film around 1910.

Furthermore, during the period from 1898 to 1904 managers and audience alike roundly viewed films as a novelty whose time was passing. An explosive featured act when first introduced in 1896, film no longer represented the “up-to-date” for audiences; two years after film’s vaudeville debut “the interest of the vaudeville public was visibly waning.”⁵⁵³ Even when post-1898’s embrace of spectacular actualities (particularly scenes connected to the Spanish-American War) helped film survive demands for currency, the nascent and fratricidal film industry proved unable to keep up with vaudeville’s voracious demand for new material. Managers complained through the early years of the new century that they received the same pictures time and again. Vaudeville audiences—accustomed to entering under banners

⁵⁵¹ M.J. Keating, Manager’s Report (Boston), 10 Aug. 1903, Keith-Albee Collection, University of Iowa, Iowa City.

⁵⁵² Renton 299-301.

⁵⁵³ David Robinson, *From Peep Show to Palace: The Birth of the American Film* (New York: Columbia UP, 1996) 73.

like the Arch Street Theatre's "New Faces!—New Features!"—usually expected acts to repeat no more often than once a season; even then they often preferred new material.⁵⁵⁴ The second appearance of an immutable film not only reproduced its referent but often iterated the audience's previous encounter. Continually offering complaints of "old subjects and uninteresting ones at that," managers did little to offer film the prominence that would have assured vaudevillians contemplating integrated turns.⁵⁵⁵

Finally, the proliferation of integrated acts after 1910 was greatly motivated by the popularity enjoyed by film with the introduction of medium-exclusive film arcades, such as the nickelodeon, after 1905.⁵⁵⁶ Growth was explosive. Harry Davis, conceiver of the nickelodeon (and a Pittsburgh vaudeville theatre owner), expanded his miniature film empire to include locations in Rochester, Philadelphia and New York within a year of taking in his first buffalo head;⁵⁵⁷ within two years he had fifteen theatres.⁵⁵⁸ By the decisive year of 1910, when acts combining film and live performance appeared with some regularity in vaudeville, 26 million patrons, by then most likely representing the various strata of economic and social classes that also ensured vaudeville's popular success, attended cinema houses weekly.⁵⁵⁹ In

⁵⁵⁴ Program, "Gus Hill's World of Novelties and Greatest All-Feature Show," Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library, New York City, New York.

⁵⁵⁵ M. J. Keating, Manager's Report (Boston), 10 Aug. 1903, Keith-Albee Collection, University of Iowa, Iowa City.

⁵⁵⁶ The term "nickelodeon" can be a source of great confusion when looking at this shift as it had previously been applied to other attractions charging five cents. Borrowing the term—and simultaneously advertising the affordability of his fare—Davis entitled his second Pittsburgh theatre "The Nickelodeon." Following the decisive popularity of Davis's nickel arcades the term became exclusive to these motion picture facilities.

⁵⁵⁷ Charles Musser, *The Emergence of Cinema: The American Screen to 1907* (New York: 1990) 419-21.

⁵⁵⁸ Robinson 90.

⁵⁵⁹ As the furious mid-1990s debate between Robert Allen and Ben Singer demonstrates, absolute statements regarding the class of cinema patrons in the period from 1905-1910 continue to elude us. Miriam Hansen presciently noted a half-decade earlier, "Few topics in film history have generated more controversy than that of the social composition of early audiences." Depending on the data and methodology one employs, convincing arguments can be made for a pre-1910 film audience dominated by working class patrons or middle class ticket holders. Regardless of one's interpretation of the brief

displaying an increasing interest in film during its explosion in popularity, vaudevillians, adherents to an ethos that prized novelty and topicality, appropriated the latest fad, much as they had developed trick cycling acts after the rapid popularization of the bicycle in the 1890s.⁵⁶⁰ Indeed, during film's early years few vaudevillians appear to have noticed that it presented any lasting threat to surrounding live acts. Even as late as 1931, mere months before vaudeville's esteemed Palace Theatre was to shift over to an all-cinema format, one former vaudevillian looking over film's decimation of the vaudeville landscape, hopefully insisted, "The novelty is wearing out."⁵⁶¹

After 1910, a vogue for combining film with live performance appeared in vaudeville. Most acts attempting an early integration of film into live performance simply interpolated the footage between live segments of the act. Anna Held, appearing before a tough 1914 Orpheum audience "demonstrating its usual common sense," attempted to compensate for the diminishing popularity of "the famous Held wriggle" (charmingly described as "Frenchy" by one reviewer) by complimenting the "ditties" with "several handsome gowns." Already plummeting in the esteem of Brooklyn audiences who had "seen and heard ... better singing comedians" since

period following the advent of the nickelodeon, it appears certain that, like vaudeville, the early cinema's successful "long-range strategy was to submerge all class distinction in an ostensibly homogenous culture of consumption." (Hansen 65.) Though I agree with Singer that audiences most likely continued to segregate themselves by neighborhood (which carried accompanying presumptions of ethnicity, race, economic class, etc.), evidence strongly suggests that most groups within the wider urban population were attending cinema with some regularity by the time vaudevillians began incorporating film with live performance in 1910. Ben Singer, "Manhattan Nickelodeons: New Data on Audiences and Exhibitors," *Cinema Journal* 34, no. 3 (Spring 1995). Robert Allen, "Manhattan Myopia; or, Oh! Iowa!" *Cinema Journal* 35, no. 3 (Spring 1996). Ben Singer, "New York, Just Like I Pictured It..." *Cinema Journal* 35, no. 3 (Spring 1996). William Uricchio and Roberta E. Pearson, "New York? New York!" *Cinema Journal* 36, no. 4. Robinson 90.

⁵⁶⁰ Vaudevillians followed similar models when adapting any new technology to live performance. Early appearances in the house were staged as curiosities (e.g., Koster & Bial's 1896 simple display of a short film, a bicyclist circling the stage on a penny-farthing). As technological improvements occurred (e.g., a brighter incandescent bulb in film projectors, chain-driven bicycles with pneumatic tires) vaudevillians, assured that underlying technology could support experimentation, developed elaborate routines to demonstrate the expertise presumed of a specialist.

⁵⁶¹ Caverly "Early Days."

Held's heyday, Held desperately tried to cover the interminable costume changes by projecting kinemacolor films of her about town (e.g., feeding animals at the zoo).⁵⁶² The relative structural and narrative simplicity of this first category of interpolative acts arises partly due to the vaudevillian's understandable lack of intimate conversancy with the new medium. Few vaudevillians had worked in the films at this point; fewer still were technically competent enough to order or stage material that required complex special effects or deft, multi-layered integration into live performance. As well, vaudeville artists who had long judged their success through an immediate application to the audience were hardly at their best when facing the mindlessly reflective camera lens. For this reason alone, contended critic Norman Levy in 1910, fanciers of the new cinema houses receive an article inherently inferior to the vaudeville show. "Ask any comedian," he suggested, "if he could hope to be as funny with only a camera before him in place of a laughing, applauding crowd of spectators!"⁵⁶³

A tendency toward simple intercalation of film sequences within live action also spoke of a bent toward traditional narrative order native to even the most fantastic acts. Though many performances were wildly idiosyncratic in their styles and choice of material most turns could also be read in terms of a conventional play: an expository introduction of the self to the audience wherein one established the ways, means and style of the turn; the developing action constituted by the display of skill; the climactic *coup de theatre* of the "big finish;" and the dénouement of a bow/curtain speech and subsequent shift-over to the next act. Bills—with their opening dumb acts that established the tenor of the house, climaxed at the headlining position and gently deflated during the chaser—also adhered to the structure of a traditional piece from the

⁵⁶² "Anna Held at the Orpheum," *Brooklyn Eagle* 31 Mar. 1914.

⁵⁶³ Norman Levy, "The Future of Vaudeville," Harvard Theatre Collection, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Vaudeville Folder #1

legitimate theatre.⁵⁶⁴ When faced with this odd, flickering beast above their heads, most performers understandably sought to restore a traditional sense of narrative cohesion to their turns.

Such base interpolative schemas continued to frame vaudeville as a genre of live performance in which film chiefly served as a lesser compliment to the vaudevillian, one intrinsically less interesting to the audience than the authentic performer. Held's audience was not meant to continue its interaction with Held, herself a mutable theatrical artifact, during the films, but instead shift to a different, more passive consumer role. Held had good reason to fear handing the audience the reins during her absence. Her public image battered by a contentious divorce from Florenz Ziegfeld two years earlier, Held was clinging to a career as a headliner. The eighteen-inch waist and flashing, dark eyes with which she launched her life as singer of "saucy" songs had given way to "advancing plumpness and a face which was showing signs of Gallic homeliness" by the age of forty-one.⁵⁶⁵ The divorce robbed her of Ziegfeld's not inconsiderable publicity talents. Moreover, the favor that accreted to her through long success in vaudeville and the follies began to fragment after repeated poor receptions, leaving her increasingly vulnerable to an audience that had found new favorites in Held's line. Held thus used the films as archival citations of a self situated in space and time beyond the grasp of the audience. The films, fixed in the unyielding gaze of the camera but interspaced with appearances of the authentic performer, metatextually designate the filmic Held as object while implicitly assigning subjective power to the actual person appearing upon the stage: Anna Held had

⁵⁶⁴ This is not to say that the nature of an act or the type of turn it performed necessarily fixed it at any one spot in the bill. Though conventions of the standard bill were likely to earmark certain types of acts for certain places in the order (e.g., an acrobatic troupe as the opening act), audience favor remained the determinant factor. A popular and winning enough trick juggler could rise into the headlining position; an inept enough song-and-dance duo might find themselves relegated to chaser.

⁵⁶⁵ Anthony Slide, *The Vaudevillians*. (Westport, CT: Arlington House, 1981) 70, 71.

created “Anna Held” prior to and away from the disruptive presence of the live audience.⁵⁶⁶ Like the behind-the-scenes interviews and on-the-set photographs that would swiftly drive the flowering cinema star system, such citations helped provide “the contours of a larger discourse of believability built to enhance the realism” of the performance.⁵⁶⁷ It was, for a vaudeville audience that attended the theatre to watch the rotogravure leap to life, a stunning inversion.

Interpolative acts that simply alternated live performances and film signaled the beginning of a profound shift in vaudeville’s conceptualization of the motion picture vis a vis the authentic performer. Formerly framed within vaudeville rhetoric as a presence signaling uninteresting absence (the chaser), acts such as Held’s reflected a new belief that the traditionally interactive audience was developing an interest in engagement that precluded agency. Held imagined her fickle audience, moving on to slimmer waistlines and less lined eyes, would not disengage from the act proper, but instead busy itself with her image until she returned. The film was not part of the act, but rather flickered on in its interstices. As chasers, films had killed shows. Now they killed time. Shifting the audience effortlessly away from productive interaction toward disembodied gaze, such simple interpolative acts represented a keen challenge to vaudeville’s service as a seat for dialogic production, particularly worrisome in an era bent on mass reform.

More complex interpolative acts depended upon cinema’s referential power to validate the authenticity of live performance. In 1910-11 the Curtiss Aeroplane, holder of the world’s air speed record, played theatres across the country. The act opened with a motion picture playing “in one”—in front of the dropped main curtain

⁵⁶⁶ Such authorship was particularly strong for performers such as Held who traveled with their own set, backdrops, musicians and orchestra leader. Every element of Held’s performance was understood to lie under the performer’s authorial domination.

⁵⁶⁷ Jennifer M. Bean, “Technologies of Early Stardom and the Extraordinary Body,” *Camera Obscura* 16, no. 48 (2001) 12.

—while John Fleming, a young aviator, gave a lecture from the stage about the plane and its historic flight. Next, the curtains pulled back to the five position—the deepest plane—to reveal the authentic article, bathed in an inextricable aura of Benjaminian authenticity. Finally, some audience members climbed up on stage and minutely examined the craft for themselves.⁵⁶⁸ Footage of the plane in flight opened the turn, providing a photographic “description” of the plane executing difficult maneuvers. In the past, as with the “experts” who accompanied static photographic projections of exotic locales, the on-stage airman would have performed such a task. Because they had “witnessed” the plane “really” flying, rather than depending on what might have been a rather florid, highly subjective description from Fleming—nobody treasured adverbs and adjectives like even the most amateur vaudevillian—the audience members could think themselves to have escaped the mediation of stage interlocutor and defeated the distancing mechanisms of both time and space; they had, after all, just seen for themselves a flight that took place some time ago at a location far from their homes.

However, such an idealization of the film portion was only possible because the audiences seem to have conceptualized such motion pictures “actualities” (e.g., a dog running around a field, or a fire crew racing from the station) primarily as examples of objective journalism. Viewers certainly understood that film had an ever-growing number of sub-categories. Some of the films presented in the vaudeville house, such as the monumentally successful “A Journey to Luna” [aka “A Trip to the Moon”] (1902), demonstrated the new medium’s ability to construct rich fantasy worlds. Others, including the increasing number of comic shorts, presented obviously fictive amusements. Yet with the actualities, the audience appears not to have called

⁵⁶⁸ Review of Poli’s Theatre (Scranton, PA), Pat Rooney II Collection, Harry Ransom Humanities Center, University of Texas, Austin: Folder C-2. W.W. Prosser, Manager’s Report (Columbus), 14 Nov. 1903, Keith-Albee Collection, University of Iowa, Iowa City.

deeply into question the authenticity of the series of images. Editing, staging, and repeated takes to arrive at a desired result did not enter into viewership schema the audience carried over from live vaudeville, nor could one have expected it to. During live performances all editing or shifts in perspective took place within the domain of the audience. There was only one take. Sequencing of the signifiatory units was absolute and verifiable. Surviving managerial comments on audience reaction to actualities such as the Curtiss footage make clear that the only interrogation surviving from variety hall days was around how the camera was able to serve as witness, not if its testimony could be trusted. Noting a rare instance when a film, usually a chaser, “kept an audience from flicker to close,” one 1911 manager reported the heart of the audience’s interest. The brief actuality had focused on a family of “wild birds in their nests and at-large.” There was, we are told, “considerable wonder as to how the cameraman got [the footage].”⁵⁶⁹ The consideration that the shots of birds in flight might have been authentic while the nest shots might have been staged does not enter into the discussion.

In applying the viewership model from live performance to descriptive film, the audience obliterated the distinctions and sense of resistant observation that might otherwise have appeared. That twelve airplanes might have crashed before the film was completed, that the cinema plane might not be the one on stage, that several tricks might have been edited together to form “one” flight, none of these factors arose to compromise this “unmediated” conveyance of “truth.” In so ignoring the act of disruptive, altering mediation, the audience displaced the referent with its cinematic double. They had “really” seen a plane fly, but the only flight within their spectating grasp was the cinematic Curtiss. Curiously—and in terms of an involved,

⁵⁶⁹ “Pretty Ballet Tells a Story,” newspaper review, 1911-1912 scrapbook, Pat Rooney II Collection, Harry Ransom Center for the Humanities, University of Texas, Austin, Texas.

interrogating electorate, tragically—the audience members then crawled all over the plane, performing so rigorous an inspection that the most salient point of the act was lost: they had never really seen it move at all. The cinematic plane reduces the physical artifact, the only thing within the grasp of the audience, to a role as paratextual citation: a live, static footnote to an archival, dynamic event. The physical contact with the plane ultimately brings the audience members close to the precipice of hyperreality. If spectators of more advanced interpolative acts did not quite engage in the “fetishism with the lost object” of which Baudrillard warns, they lay in immanent danger of “founder[ing] ... in the meticulous reduplication of the real.” Such a “nostalgic resurrection” lays only one brief buck-and-wing step from the “generalized manipulation” of the “industrial machine” Progressivism sought to counter.⁵⁷⁰

As was true of the “professors” who accompanied static visual projections, performers such as Captain Fleming helped found the cinematic presentations within the corporeal presence of a truly authentic, aura bearing “flesh and blood vaudeville artist.”⁵⁷¹ This effect was even more powerful when the presenter foregrounded himself as a participatory witness to the filmed events. In 1917 a group of “fighting men of the 71st [regiment]” returned from the European front to play the Palace. The turn began with the men sharing “songs and camp anecdotes,” revealing, marveled one critic, “something genuine about the number that braces everybody up.” Ignoring the tales of mustard gas and entrenched warfare that rolled forth from many of the papers, the Palace instead offered a turn celebrating “the jolly Army life and its funny jokes....” The soldiers, having established their authenticity to the audience,

⁵⁷⁰ Jean Baudrillard, *Selected Writings*, trans. and ed. Mark Poster (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1988) 145, 144, 121.

⁵⁷¹ Gaynor O’Gorman qtd. in E.F. Murch, “Vaudeville Actors About to Stage Greatest Act to Win Blue Eagle,” Harvard Theatre Collection, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Folder # 1.

introduced “another warlike number that is immensely popular:” a film entitled “The Retreat of the Germans at the Battle of Arras.”

The pictures are accompanied by a talk that is far from usual. Norman McLeod, who was formerly treasurer of the Orpheum Theatre, in Brooklyn, after three years of hard fighting in Flanders with the Royal Scots Fusiliers, was finally wounded at Lens and has been invalided home. He is crippled for life but will have an assured position in the Keith offices. During the next three weeks he will describe the scenes and actions in the films.⁵⁷²

McLeod’s presence partly empowers the audience: his body, his words and his representations place an important part of the turn back within the real-time/real-space chronotope of the vaudeville house. Additionally, a viewership model defined by interaction, interrogation, and response remained in force at the time of the act; its pre-filmic audience required, in Phelan’s words, “the live body or live (‘staged’) event” to remain, for a time, “the crucial atom that defines ‘performance’ as such.”⁵⁷³ However, through the associative aura with which he imbues the film—again more hyperreal than real—the presence of the veteran also asks the audience to plunge into a heavily mediated reality that lay outside the experience of many and effective control of all, an event further encumbered by the frequently jingoistic manner in which vaudeville praised American armed forces.⁵⁷⁴ It is a request for validation by proxy to which American audiences would soon become all too accustomed.

Interpolative lecture acts such as those involving the Curtiss plane or the limping theatre treasurer (the latter soon to be a tragically metaphorical figure for

⁵⁷²“War at the Palace.” *New York Tribune* 18 Sep. 1917.

⁵⁷³ Phelan contrasts the audience for the 1992 American presidential election with predecessors less conditioned by filmic media. Peggy Phelan, “Rats and Democrats,” *TDR* 37, no. 3 (Fall, 1993) 171.

⁵⁷⁴ Joe Laurie, Jr. recalls vaudeville’s song writers, upon America’s entrance into World War I, “ground out war song with feverish haste and blattance [sic].” Joe Laurie, Jr., *Show Biz: From Vaude to Video* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1951) 125.

vaudeville's box office) drew upon a viewership model conditioned by the preponderance of actuality films during cinema's first decade in vaudeville. The noted success of fantasy/science fiction films such as "A Journey to the Moon" (1903) notwithstanding, the supermajority of primitive era films on the vaudeville stage concerned themselves with representations of reality, running from the quotidian (children on a see-saw) to the everyday-fantastic (fire engines rushing to their call) to the spectacular (war). The increasing expertise of narrative fiction within film (buttressed by technological improvements in equipment, stock, and projection) provided new models for vaudevillians looking to push film beyond its existence as registry.⁵⁷⁵ (It is no accident that narrative interpolative acts appeared in greater force alongside narrative feature films.⁵⁷⁶) "A Mornin' in Hickville" (1911), an elaborate ventriloquism turn, won fine notices for its complexity of staging and intermingling of cinema, dummies, and live performers. The sketch opens with a drop in five (a screen suspended over a full stage). The stage, peopled with dummies, is made up to resemble the small town of "Hickville." On the screen plays a film in which a distant large, red touring car travels down a winding country road toward the stage town beneath the drop. The film cuts to a shot showing the car much closer to town. The film abruptly halts, as ventriloquist Ed Reynard, portraying a chauffeur, drives onto

⁵⁷⁵ Tom Gunning raises important challenges to an often pejorative model of "primitive" film that stands "in need of further examination and critique." Seventeen years later after Gunning's entreaty much work still remains to be done. Tom Gunning, "'Primitive' Cinema—A Frame-up? or The Trick's on Us," *Cinema Journal* 28, No.2 (Winter 1989) 3.

⁵⁷⁶ Development of the feature film in America also waited upon the evolution of corporate cinema's business model. As Ben Brewster notes, the low ticket price of early film-exclusive screenings demanded such rapid turnover of audience that exhibition houses became tied to film lengths of no greater than one thousand feet. I would add that film relied too heavily on nickelodeons and vaudeville for ancillary exhibitions. The former was unable to move beyond shorts, the latter unwilling to sacrifice stage time beyond a set period. The cinema industry thus had to birth movie-exclusive exhibition halls before it would possess venues in which films could increase past three reels. The chicken and egg within the era's feature film poser, technology and narrative competency, waited upon a nest. Ben Brewster, "'Traffic in Souls' (1913): An Experiment in Feature-Length Narrative Construction," *Cinema Journal* 31, no. 1 (1991) 41-43.

stage in what appears to have been the very automobile from the film.⁵⁷⁷ Throughout the following scene, Reynard, providing the voices, confronts a “bevy of small-town characters,” each manipulated by one of his five hidden assistants.

At first glance the film would appear to be largely superfluous. Unlike the Curtiss plane clips or World War I footage it is never called upon as explanatory or exculpatory material later in the turn. The importance of the film, however, is threefold. First, like the short Held films, it begins a live act as a registry of past events, rather than an onslaught of present action. The act greets the audience with a hand already stretched beyond its productive reach. Additionally, the film demonstrates a growing interest in bringing the particularly photographic brand of realism into vaudeville. In so doing it marries a presumed fidelity to the referent with erasure of spectatorial conjecture. It answers all of the self-important contextual questions with which past vaudeville had shown little interest but with which the legitimate realistic stage increasingly concerned itself: How did the car get there? Where was the town situated? Was Reynard really speeding before he was pulled over?

Furthermore, the abutment of film and live performance combines with ventriloquism in a provocative staging of the modern audience member in the person of the dummy. The act begins with a mechanized, unalterable performance text in the “character” of the film, a character that only cedes the stage to the live performer when he is conveyed to the audience's attention by another machine, the automobile. (Reynard, chauffeur to an otherwise empty car, finally escorts onto stage only the automobile itself.) The people in Hickville are themselves ultimately machines (i.e., dummies). The braiding together of delight with symbolic error during a ventriloquist

⁵⁷⁷ The car is described by one reviewer as “no canvas affair but a real, red gasoline buggy.” Untitled review, Pat Rooney II Collection, Harry Ransom Humanities Center, University of Texas, Austin: File C-1.

act depends upon the audience simultaneously endowing the dummy with the qualities and individuality of a "real" person while knowingly juxtaposing that "individuality" against the patent control of the ventriloquist.⁵⁷⁸ Reynard's townspeople-as-dummies therefore stage a mass of citizens deliciously awash in a (mis)recognition of seemingly evident and powerful sense of personal agency.⁵⁷⁹

Indeed, both because and in spite of being shackled by a petrified typology of small-town American characterization, quite a bit of action takes place in Hickville: the volunteer fire department responds to a call, folks go fishing, a pawnbroker trolls for merchandise, and "enraged inhabitants" of the town finally rise to kill the yeowling cats.⁵⁸⁰ Yet when the town "comes to life," the characters/dummies, each with an assistant's hand in place of a spine, can only mouth the words fed to them by the central voice of the ventriloquist. Twin terrifying visions of a post-Progressive American electorate thus take the stage in "Mornin' in Hickville," occupying the position of both object (the dummies) and subject (Reynard). In the former we find the dummy that jaws away, blithely unaware of his lack of true agency and individual identity; each man, woman and child has a hand firmly up its back. In the latter, stalks the ventriloquist, subject of a medium that berates him as object, jailing and abusing him; he is victim of a society grown immanently (in the Bakhtinian sense) beyond any self-consciousness of his actual control. Both, it might be argued, are perilously accurate renderings of constituent elements in critical democracy that have failed to produce, rather than consume, their culture and means of governance.

⁵⁷⁸ See Susan Purdie, *Comedy: The Mastery of Discourse* (Toronto: Toronto UP, 1993) 12-16 for discussion of comedy as symbolic misrecognition.

⁵⁷⁹ Untitled review, Pat Rooney II Collection, Harry Ransom Humanities Center, University of Texas, Austin: File C-1.

⁵⁸⁰ "Pat Rooney Does the Name Proud," Pat Rooney II Collection, Harry Ransom Humanities Center, University of Texas, Austin: File C-1

The third and most complex form of interpolative vaudeville act employed the film not as an unassailable totem of the real but as a fantastic departure from reality in the shape of a dream. In “The Son of Solomon,” Aaron Hoffman’s 1912 playlet, David, a prodigal young Jewish man, returns home. He demands \$500 from his father to pay off a forged bank note. Rebuffed, the boy later tries to steal it from his father’s desk. During the attempted burglary an alarm sounds, drawing his sister who pleads with him to return the money. Met with an arrogant refusal, she threatens him with a gun; unexpectedly, it fires, missing the boy but sending him into epileptic fit. While he lies unconscious on the stage, the theatre’s motion picture screen descends over his body—hovering like a suspended shroud above the corpse of the real. A film shows a dream in which David, maddened by avarice, kills his sister, and is subsequently tried and executed. At the end of the film, the screen rises; the boy awakens, and promises to live a better life.⁵⁸¹ Five years later, the Christmas week headliner for Keith’s Washington, D.C. house was Marion Craig Wentworth’s sketch, “The Bonfire of Old Empires,’ a symbolic playlet of the times:”

The story tells of the struggle for liberty among the smaller nations and its final triumph. A captain of one of the big empires falls asleep, and the story is unfolded in a dream, through the convenient movies. The sending out of Liberty to the oppressed people, his success, followed by peace and love, is told on the screen and leads up to the [on stage] conversion of the captain through the missionary work of a woman worker among the people. ... The views of the troops of different nations and a part of President Wilson’s appeal for democracy created the greatest enthusiasm.⁵⁸²

⁵⁸¹ Leo Levy, “Hugh Herbert Faithful as Jew in Orpheum Sketch,” 12 Feb. 1912, Harvard Theatre Collection, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

⁵⁸² “B.F. Keith’s,” *Washington, D.C. Evening Star*, 25 Dec. 1917.

Both sketches utilize cinema in a fashion consistent with vaudeville's original employment of the medium: as narrative dumbshow, an occurrence embedded within and yet most definitely a departure from live performance. In each of these examples, however, we also have important staging of the emerging ethos of vaudeville film spectatorship. The dream state necessarily plunges both David and the captain into a state of docile observance. Their dream doubles may act out in an illusory existence but the two authentic persons remain unconscious and incapable of real-time resistance during the unfolding of the dreams.

Both might certainly have awoken and adjudicated the dream as false or unworthy, of course. Undoubtedly, vaudeville audiences treated particularly disagreeable or unsatisfying films the same way. But like vaudeville audiences with their films, neither David nor the captain shared the basic chronotopic stability with the dream world that might have engendered and encouraged productive interaction. Any action against or within the dream world by the "real characters" would have been the muttering, fitful sleep of those who oppose without hope of alteration. Instead, eschewing the realism of the actuality, David's dream ascended to the Kantian sublimeness of a terrorizing but redemptive chimera while the captain's vision, like the Western missionary trope that frames its climax, posits an erring subject in need of a foreign, objectifying gaze.⁵⁸³ In addition, both sketches endorse the cinematic realm as one of instructive, even revelatory, truths and premonitions. David's dream forecasts the actual life presaged by his current path; the captain's shows what lies along the path he has not taken. Both predictions, we are led to believe, are accurate: revealed in the dream world, obscure in the life-world. Finally, of course, the cinematic portion of these turns removed part of the sketches from the grasp of the

⁵⁸³ For an interesting assertion of the cinematic sublime see Cynthia A. Freeland, "The Sublime in Cinema," eds. Carl Plantinga and Greg M. Smith, *Passionate Views: Film, Cognition and Emotion* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1999) 65-83.

actual vaudeville audience. As each film now exists as part of the subject's temporally bound narrative, quite unlike Held's simple costume covers, a threat to agency clarifies. In comparison, during Joseph Jefferson's famed nineteenth-century performance as Rip van Winkle we find live performance bringing van Winkle's life world and dream world into collaborative dialogue with that of Jefferson's live audience. A joke that went over particularly well in a dream scene section, for example, could have been merrily and uniquely referenced when van Winkle returned to his wife. The loss of collaboration demonstrates the injury to spectator productivity occurring within vaudeville and its omnivorous cinema.

Audiences and critics alike met integrated turns with an intermingling of fascinated enjoyment and visceral dismissal. On one hand, many integrated acts, like Wentworth's headlining turn, "scored emphatically."⁵⁸⁴ The sheer proliferation of integrated turns is the clearest example that such material was plumbing the audience's favor; their migration to the favored spots on the bill—Wentworth, remember, was the headliner of a holiday bill—demonstrates their increased worth. American mass audiences were also comfortable enough with both media to fuel the nickelodeon explosion even as they pushed vaudeville to new heights of popularity. Nevertheless, it was increasingly clear that while the two media were capable of engaging one another in fascinating displays, many sensed vaudeville came out the worse for the bargain.

Reviewer Ralph Renaud praised playwright/actor Hoffman for "justifying his artistic right" to combine motion pictures with live performance in "Son of Solomon" but also struggled with inchoate feelings of disjuncture between the two forms. Renaud enjoyed the live performance. He thought the film well done. The mixture of the two created an "up-to-date" quality treasured by the weary reviewer. ("When one

⁵⁸⁴ "B.F. Keith's," *Washington, D.C. Evening Star*, 25 Dec. 1917.

goes to vaudeville with relentless regularity it is apt to become a bore,” Renaud despaired, “And even, very, very, good numbers seem tame and flat.”) Still, the final product seemed somehow to rob the non-cinematic portion of its vivacity and momentum. In the end, concludes Renaud, it is “a dangerous thing to interpolate a moving picture into the midst of a realistic domestic drama.”⁵⁸⁵ A second reviewer discovered similar problems when he tackled Wentworth’s act. “[‘The Bonfire of Old Empires’] receives a ready response from a sympathetically patriotic audience,” he agreed, “but the introduction of a lengthy symbolic motion picture restricts . . . the leading players, and the story loses thereby.”⁵⁸⁶ Norman Levy, contemplating “The Future of Vaudeville” in 1911, concurred. Film had a certain place in vaudeville, Levy grudgingly assented, but the point of primacy must remain with live performance, if only because spectators enable a higher quality product. “After all,” reasoned Levy, if “a performer . . . is to be at all effective he has to have an audience.”⁵⁸⁷

Despite these misgivings, integration of the two media continued apace throughout the 1910s. As performers and audiences grew more comfortable with the formally simple interpolated turns some vaudevillians began experimenting with a melding of live performance and cinema that moved the ground from interpolation to increasingly full integration: vaudevillians brought their performance selves into staged convergence with cinematic registries to form a startling hybrid of live performance and film. Such convergence turns sought to create the illusion of inter-media dialogue during the real-time of the performance by embracing the illusion of productive metatextual interaction.

⁵⁸⁵ Ralph E. Renaud, “Russian Players Make Odd Music,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 29 Jan. 1912.

⁵⁸⁶ “Keith’s—A Christmas Bill,” *Washington Post* 25 Dec. 1917.

⁵⁸⁷ Norman Levy, “The Future of Vaudeville,” Harvard Theatre Collection, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Folder #1, 79.

In an early convergence turn from 1913 Commodore Alfred Brown appeared on a Brooklyn stage in a reenactment of his impressive swim from the Battery to Sandy Hook. The commodore entered a tank filled with “real water”—note already the soon-to-be compulsive need to distinguish the real from the represented—and swam in place against a fictional current; a mirror reflected his image to the audience. Above the staged swim, however, played “motion picture views from a launch that accompanied him on his swim....” Brown was thus swimming against a cinematic registry of the very waves, ocean conditions and passing gulls that had previously marked his own aura. When a great swell washed high on the screen, Brown would have had to try to match it. When a hastening background signaled a rapid period in the original trek, he was required to speed up his strokes in mock acceleration. Adorno and Horkheimer’s “smoothly unfolding reel of film” thus gives the lie to intermedia dialogue.⁵⁸⁸ Brown cannot affect the film at all; its chronotope of other-time/other-space maps against his theatre chronotope of real-time/real-space in such a way as to preclude dialogic modification. Brown’s spectator, like Brown himself, suspends agency in ritualized, public completion of a simulacrum. Withdrawing his self into the merest echo of agency, Brown mimetically collapses into an impotent self-referentiality in which the only successful act is an unchanging (if skillful) iteration. Likewise, the design of the act depends not on the interaction of the audience but its suspension from the field of play. Untroubled by such a dilemma, one reviewer beamed, “The combination [creates] a very real effect.”⁵⁸⁹

Such convergence turns represented rapid advancement of the massification that had always simmered beneath the surface of vaudeville. The genre struggled through its existence with a basic conundrum: founded on the principle of the

⁵⁸⁸ Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Continuum, 1995) 121.

⁵⁸⁹ “Good Union Square Bill,” *Brooklyn Eagle*, 30 Sep. 1913.

decorous uniformity granted by polite culture, it promoted uniqueness of both experience and performance as its chief drawing cards. Like the settlement houses that enlivened classes with guest lecturers on a variety of topics, vaudeville had founded itself on the belief that retaining multiple traditions and strengths within a single body of exploration would ultimately provide authentic and enriching choices for its subjects. Despite their most solemn pronouncements about propriety and the duties befitting various persons in the vaudeville enterprise, not even the most rigid local manager or corporate overlord desired homogeneity within the playhouse. Uniformity within the performing base would make it impossible to round out a bill. Indeed, one of the reasons for the continual travels of the players was to provide each urban center with a constantly fragmenting agglomeration of artists, something few consider when recounting tales of Albee's rules posted backstage or the disciplining function of the cut sheets. Having vaudeville, a mass entertainment, in town forestalled some of the more injurious effects of the general cultural shift toward massification. The genre also prized an audience sometimes riven by differing reactions to acts, ambience, architecture, and performers' personalities. Indeed, a varied audience responding to varied fare preserved the slapdash vitality that had long been one of vaudeville's most salable characteristics. Alison Kibler, for one, also troubles what would seem a clear linkage between the discipline of the manager and the desire of a completely massified audience:

In fact, Keith and the many managers working for him often seemed to be more comfortable with the construction of their audience as a collection of distinct and varied social groups than with the construction of their audience as a mass.⁵⁹⁰

⁵⁹⁰ Alison Kibler, *Rank Ladies: Gender and Cultural Hierarchy in American Vaudeville* (Chapel Hill, NC: UNC UP, 1999) 25.

Convergence turns, however, began to homogenize vaudeville performance. The relative dimness of the projector meant that most of these acts had to be played in reduced illumination. The necessity for a screen pushed many acts into “one” (i.e., downstage of the dropped main curtain); those it did not force in front of the curtain film compelled to the forestage; only then could the performer be easily compared to or interact with his image. Convergence turns also pushed major portions of the visual display, long noted for the brilliant colors in many acts’ wardrobes and setting, into a *mise en scene* dominated by a thousand shades of flickering gray. Audience vantage now mattered less in regard to one of the two “partners” in the act. Proximity to the stage or freedom in the gallery meant far less when the varying distances did not create new possibilities for experiencing presence or promoting interaction. Finally, the turns almost always placed a fairly good sized section of the act into dumbshow. The staccato dialogue and winsome banter that long characterized many schools of vaudeville performance would necessarily wither during portions of the average convergence turn. Films, heralds of difference and novelty upon their arrival in the vaudeville playhouse, now became one of the chief causes of homogeneity and massification within the performance. In this sense, vaudeville predated the rest of the nation in pitching up its countless Hoovervilles.

Convergence turns littered the 1920s, a decade that saw vaudeville roiled by the curiously public death throes America reserves for its giants. By the beginning of the decade any illusions that film represented nothing more than another in the long lineage of vaudeville fads disappeared. Attendance at the cinema houses had increased throughout the 1910s. Even the greatest dullards among the vaudevillians understood that film, unlike Burmese foot juggling and yodeling, had achieved a stature and popularity that militated for greater inclusion throughout the varied acts of the bill; the time for simple defiance had long since passed. In this, vaudeville’s

understanding of film, not having yet matured into the resigned loathing that would characterize remembrances of film throughout the 1930s, admitted the medium as a co-equal to vocal music or comedy: not a separable medium, but a performance element popular and supple enough to appear throughout the bill. As early as 1914 Oscar Hammerstein I had experimented with a bill comprised entirely of films and phonograph records to celebrate Lincoln's birthday.⁵⁹¹ Eight years after Hammerstein's show the *Rochester Journal* broke down the new equation and came away enthused by their discovery.

We are thinking of the number of times the movie screen is used as an integral part of the vaudeville performance. There are nine acts on this week's bill, exclusive of the orchestra overture and the usual Pathe News reel, and of those nine acts three of those make use of the screen. This, it seems to me, is a high percentage and a thrilling admission of the importance of the screen in our general scheme of entertainment.⁵⁹²

On the most basic level, this shift reflected vaudeville's slavish devotion to featuring anything popular. As well, the catholic nature of vaudeville's interests—embracing performance forms as disparate as opera and mathematics—made it inevitable that even media incommensurate with the genre's ethos of spectatorship, if they could keep a mostly civil tongue in their heads, would at least get a hearing before the audience. The flowering of acts integrating film and live performance during the 1920s, however, also reflected deeper movement within the genre and its relationship to cinema. During the preceding decade, as evidenced by Brown's swimming act, vaudevillians had learned to use film as a tool, much the same way they often incorporated the orchestra into their acts. In turn, vaudeville audiences had

⁵⁹¹ "Vaudeville and Burlesque," *New York Sun*, 10 Feb. 1914.

⁵⁹² *Rochester Journal*, 1922, File #2562, The United Vaudeville Artists, Inc. Protected Files, University of Southern California, Los Angeles.

learned to straddle two viewership models during performance of these varied acts, one in which their presence helped produce performance and one in which it simply consumed performance. Previous comments regarding interpolative acts, as we have seen, felt that both spectator and vaudevillian lost during a toggling between viewership models: the spectator struggled with an artificially “restricted” flow of material, the performer lost “effect[iveness]” when cut off from dialogic reciprocity with the audience. The rise of the American cinema from the Edison shorts to the silent six-reelers, however, had helped to inculcate within the popular audience an acceptance of performance media that, unlike live vaudeville acts, lay beyond the spectator’s productive capacity.

Eager to capitalize on its popularity, intrigued by the creative possibilities, and no doubt interested in appearing conversant with the form before the cinema scouts trolling the vaudeville houses, acts pulled film into their turns in record numbers. Some acts could muster little more than the interpolative acts of the decade before, though the range of later interpolative acts included nearly every style of performance. Soprano Marion Weeks employed a specially made cartoon before her rendering of the “Doll Song” from *The Tales of Hoffman*. “Moving pictures have been used to explain all kinds of things in vaudeville,” she acknowledged, “but not to explain the story of a song....” (Like Held’s earlier films, Weeks also used the cartoon to cover “a wait in my act and allows me to change costume for the number.”⁵⁹³) On the same bill Harry J. Conley and Naomi Rice dropped into “one” near the end of their turn so that the climax of the sketch could be projected on the screen.⁵⁹⁴

⁵⁹³ Marion Weeks, File #2562, The United Vaudeville Artists, Inc. Protected Files, University of Southern California, Los Angeles.

⁵⁹⁴ *Rochester Journal*, 1922, File #2562, The United Vaudeville Artists, Inc. Protected Files, University of Southern California, Los Angeles.

The more complex convergence turns directed the audience's attention to the active role played by the film portions. In 1926, fourteen years after "Son of Solomon," the team of Cole and Snyder appeared in a sketch entitled "The Director." In it, the lights are dimmed as a Charlie Chaplin film is projected. Snyder, affecting a heavy Hebrew dialect, stalks the stage, "directing" Chaplin through the Little Tramp's "mirth provoking antics" on the overhead screen. "He tells Charlie what to do," reported an enthusiastic reviewer, "and Charlie does it. A good comedy act."⁵⁹⁵ Yet the reviewer vaults past a crucial symbolic error in the chain of the act's rapid events. It is not that "He tells Charlie what to do," but that "Charlie tells him what to tell Charlie to do." Should Snyder attempt to draw out a particularly amusing moment, Charlie marches on. Should Snyder wish to insert a last-minute reference to a local hotel or comment on an audience member, Charlie continues. The laughter finally celebrates the impotency of the live performer to achieve agency within convergent turns. As Snyder enacts the dual roles of film and live theatre audience members, we have, by extension, a critique of supposed agency within a society grown immanently from its constituents. The audience's delight finally consecrates its inability to achieve any meaningful action within those events unfolding around it. One is, it may be inferred, a fool for trying at all.

The audience member retains power within the schema of convergent acts, but it is a power of a curious nature within vaudeville spectatorship. The mastership demonstrated in the spectator's gaze at such moments, like the gaze of the camera itself, exists primarily to "unite and bring forth" a single "gesture of address" out of the tense collision between live performer and cinematic persona.⁵⁹⁶ The ineluctability

⁵⁹⁵ K.S., "Portamenti and Puns," *Boston Transcript*, 17 Aug. 1926.

⁵⁹⁶ In the framing of the convergent act spectator, I draw upon Francesco Casetti's discussion of enunciation and the gaze. Francesco Casetti, *Inside the Gaze: The Fiction Film and its Spectator*, trans. Neil Andrew with Charles O'Brien (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1998) 46.

of Chaplin's cinematic presence, locked in an inimical chronotope, demands Snyder yield under the gaze of an authoritative audience. The resultant fixity, however, affects the erasure of disobedience dependent on collusion, variability, and malleability within the temporal and spatial matrices of the performance itself. Instead of enunciating Chaplin's vulnerability to liveness, the act locates him as twin archival citations: a former vaudevillian now in cinema, a previously performed act girding unfolding real time to its rigid architecture of past-ness. Equally important, Snyder, storming about the stage in a display of frenetic, puffed-up, but ultimately delusory control, provides an illusion that distracts even as it cripples. The audience, imagining its laughter to license celebration of liveness, instead revels in a new role as enforcers of an edict of objectification. Titular in both senses of the word, the "director" of the piece finally dances marionette-like to Chaplin's movements, a self-offering to the screen.⁵⁹⁷

Orchestras, long the bane of the vaudevillian's existence, were understandably pulled into this arena of servitude. Comedian Otis Francis played against a drop in one with his back to the audience. While Francis posed as "guest conductor," a film of an orchestra would begin playing on the overhead screen. Francis "directed" (i.e., followed in lockstep) the cinematic orchestra (to great amusement) while the real orchestra sawed away in back of him, desperately trying to match their notes to the

⁵⁹⁷ Though I find his conclusion ultimately reductive, Gabriel Kolko's address of Progressivism proves helpful in regard to convergent turns. Kolko argues that the era's reforms largely resulted from concerted efforts on the part of industry and government to provide relatively minor reforms that actually ensured the growth and survival of corporate dominance. (By collectively limiting the span of the workday, for example, businesses warded off the comparatively large-scale effects that looming socialism might have had on American business.) One might further hold, following Kolko's argument, the appearance of resistance to interdiction provided the various popular groups allied under Progressivism with a placating (though deceptive) sense of power. In the same way, the brief, fluttering ghosts of agency embodied in the convergence act's live performer appears to check an otherwise unabated enervation of real time agency within the vaudeville house. Gabriel Kolko, *The Triumph of Conservatism: A Reinterpretation of American History, 1900-1916* (New York: Free Press, 1963).

movements on screen.⁵⁹⁸ Given that a lack of adequate musical rehearsal with the orchestra plagued most acts, it is quite likely that Francis's turn amounted to a nightly demonstration of the orchestra's inadequacy. Indeed, the most obvious running joke between the three performers (Francis, film/visual orchestra, and live/audible orchestra) would be the "conductor's" frustrated backward glances and surprised over-the-shoulder takes as the real orchestra fails to match him in his unswerving allegiance to its cinematic doppelganger. A sketch from the following year played a motion picture on a scrim while house musicians hidden behind it were forced to "furnish whatever accompaniment is necessary in keeping with character or characters portrayed, either by playing, talking or singing, keeping time with movements of lips, fingers, etc. of said characters."⁵⁹⁹

No more telling testament to the radical shift in the vaudeville performance schema can be found than the marked rise in audience plants during the later years of convergence turns. Realizing willful vaudeville audience members sometimes preferred adversarial encounters—death to the convergence turn's dependence on invariability—performers increasingly planted members of their own acts in the audience to avoid any unexpected real-time developments. Plants weakened audience agency in two fashions. First, containment of both sides of the performance dialogue within the boundary of one party (in this case, the vaudevillians) greatly lessened the possibility of spontaneous or disruptive exchange. Though partners certainly remained free to avail themselves of communal real-time/real-space, they knew the shape, tempo and lines of the sketch; the audience did not. This effected a partial transmutation of dialogue (in which each party retains the power to affect succeeding

⁵⁹⁸ Otis Francis, 17 Oct. 1928, File #8278, United Vaudeville Artists, Inc. Protected Files, University of Southern California, Los Angeles.

⁵⁹⁹ Arnold Johnson, 24 Apr. 1929, File #8392, United Vaudeville Artists, Inc. Protected Files, University of Southern California, Los Angeles.

utterances) into conversational monologue (in which each speech or action simply succeeds its predecessor). Second, the less obvious inhabitation of the house by vaudevillians completed an effective negation of the audience's actual agency while suggesting a heightened state of effectiveness on at least one of their fellows. "The Psychologist" (1929) featured a team of plants placed strategically about the audience in the hopes that the audience would feel shot through with vigorous participants, rather than occupied by an obvious dollop of concentrated mediation. As the act begins

Man comes to the center of stage and announces he is a practical psychologist and has noted that no two people see an accident or occurrence in exactly the same manner. Many times a witness appearing before a court tells the story of something he has witnessed in a perfectly truthful manner yet he either unconsciously misrepresents or cannot remember certain important details.

The psychologist will demonstrate this fact. Calls for a picture sheet and [scenes of an auto accident, then a man flirting with a lady, and finally an African American and Irishman fighting are] then thrown upon the screen.

The audience is requested to act as witnesses in the scene.

At this point, however, the plants took over. From their positions in the balcony, and house right and left the actors began their scripted exchanges with the stage "psychologist." If any actual members of the audience attempted to engage the psychologist—the mediator for the mediating device—his compatriots had standing orders to "contradict" them and get the act back on its preordained path.⁶⁰⁰

As vaudeville approached its demise in the early 1930s the more shockingly self-aware acts used the new talking pictures to completely displace live vaudevillians

⁶⁰⁰ Joseph Mercedes, 01 Dec. 1929, File #8460, United Vaudeville Artists, Inc. Protected Files, University of Southern California, Los Angeles.

from the stage proper, casting them out into the house as disenfranchised audience members. Comedian Albert Se'ror spent 1930 working on a

dialogue of two or more people talking and business done with talking picture on the screen to plants in audience. The idea is that some people acting on the screen motion picture, talking back and forth to plant or plants in audience, and that the plant talks back to performer or performers on the screen.⁶⁰¹

Song and dance man Tom Wilson planned a convergent act that would double back upon an empty stage in a heart-rending notation of shuttered agency. The act began with a film of Wilson singing songs and engaging in patter-talk at (not, of course, with) the audience. Suddenly, the cinematic Wilson discovers the authentic Wilson sitting out in the audience and begins what Wilson cast as a “dialogue . . . between me in person and myself in the talking picture.” He goes on to the stage then to tell a few jokes without “the aid” of the film. When it comes time for a closing duet, however, Wilson relates that he chose to “harmonize with myself...”⁶⁰²

Some later turns so fully invested performance in a cinematic chronotope that “performance” itself disappeared. In 1922, Huston Ray, a classical concert pianist, first played big-time vaudeville. Concerned that his audience lacked narrative context for his piece from *Rigoletto*, Ray arranged to have a short film made of the particular scene. “As the artist starts to play,” he informs us, “the story which colors his imagination is shown to the audience from the screen.” Lest the audience attempt to intuit Ray’s emotion or the scene’s narrative through the actual playing, the aura-less presence of the cinematic actors grounded them. Should they call for an encore, Adorno’s “smoothly unfolding reel of film” marched the piece onward. Ray excitedly

⁶⁰¹ Albert Se'ror, Olson Collection, The United Vaudeville Artists, Inc. Protected Files, University of Southern California, Los Angeles: File #8533.

⁶⁰² Tom Wilson, 10 Oct. 1929, File #8484, United Vaudeville Artists, Inc. Protected Files, University of Southern California, Los Angeles.

laid out the future of his act in a materials protection request to the United Vaudeville Artists. He claimed to be preparing a turn that married "the synchronized photoplay projection" of his playing the piece at a piano with his live performance. The act thus further solidified against the intrusive reach of the audience that watched as Ray strove to exactly match his live performance to his cinematic image. Ultimately, he confided, the turn would aim for a "synchronization of an artist's musical recording . . . with the artist's photoplay projection of the actual performance." That is, in the case of the latter request, Ray anticipated a time when he would present a formally sealed tandem of cinematic image and recorded music as his entire act, completely eliminating both his authentic presence and the audience's capacity for productive engagement. Ray envisioned the approaching "talkies" that would take advantage of the new viewership to consume vaudeville.⁶⁰³

Vaudeville died a little each day of the 1920s, a decade during which, in the words of the forlorn former vaudevillian Frank Caverly

Pictures improved. . . . They outran both vaudeville and the legitimate, inveigled away both stars and plays, built up a personnel of their own that they developed into the world's most famous folk, went into theatres far finer, at lower prices and gave shows that no one could match.⁶⁰⁴

As Caverly notes, a host of issues, most beyond the scope of this project, played a part in the interrelated rise of cinema and collapse of vaudeville. In larger urban areas, movie palaces overshadowed some of vaudeville's most commodious and well-appointed theatres. Attendance in cinema had always been less expensive than any of its live performance counterparts, but became even more attractive as centralized

⁶⁰³ Huston Ray, File #2067 of The United Vaudeville Artists, Inc. Protected Files, University of Southern California, Los Angeles.

⁶⁰⁴ Frank Caverly, "Early Days of Vaudeville in Boston Theaters," *Boston American* 1931, Harvard Theatre Collection, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

production and distribution checked inflation of ticket prices. Experiencing the slow decay of attendance, managers found themselves unable to maintain the high salaries and decorous theatre interiors of its heyday in the 1910s.

And though many vaudevillians, at a romantic remove from the genre, would later recall its palmy days with an esteem bordering on reverence, few performers refused the lure of cinema's offer of more money for less arduous work. If film had struck vaudeville its fatal blow, vaudevillians had walked away from the gasping victim. Partly as a result of this hunger for Hollywood lucre, vaudevillians developed a new understanding of status within the performing class as they bounced between media. Film offered greater salary, yes, but also featured fewer actual weeks of work. Performers called upon to film variants of their original acts therefore earned the equivalent of several weeks' salary with comparatively little effort. George Burns and Gracie Allen, for example, made \$1800 for an improvised nine-minute film during a period when their contract paid \$400 for twelve shows per week (out of which, in vaudeville, they would have had to subtract booking fees, agent's commission, travel expenses, and the new curse, income tax).⁶⁰⁵ Formerly, performers throughout vaudeville had judged their market success by a combination of two factors: weeks booked and salary per week. Though performers prized the grand salaries of the headliners and wearied of the road, most in classic vaudeville viewed "at liberty" vaudevillians, wont to gather at "The Wailing Wall" outside the 44th Street Theatre, with little but disdain. Employment in film radically altered the sense of employment status in vaudeville, creating a new valuation on leisure time rather than engagement periods. For the first time, performers judged one another and themselves by the simple calculus of capital. Gone was the genre's prizing of industry, now replaced by

⁶⁰⁵ George Burns, interview, *Educational Theatre Journal* 27, No. 3 (Oct. 1975) 351.

visions of sated indolence that would soon define popular fantasies of the Hollywood lifestyle.

Many theatres, acquiescing to the gravitational pull of cinema's popularity, incorporated stand-alone films within the performance to such a degree that performers, not "flickers," became the exception. "Vaudefilm," a type of variety "performance" that leant more on cinema than live acts, employed vaudevillians between films that were growing in length and narrative complexity. Rather than preserving a hybrid form of vaudeville through an intermedia alliance, vaudefilm's radical centralization around film destroyed the delicate balance of the traditional vaudeville bill. As George Gottlieb, head booker for New York's Palace Theatre, explained in 1916, the "psychology of the American vaudeville show" did not embrace variety for variety's sake, but instead carefully calibrated its offering with one another. "'Variety' is the paternal name of vaudeville," allowed Gottlieb, "but out of this variety a unity must be built."⁶⁰⁶ In the end, the cupidity of the managers, who had long publicized their deep belief that a good bill combined the best elements of showmanship, public stewardship, and engineering, fatally compromised the structural integrity of the performance by allowing it to collapse upon a single, dominant type of act: film.⁶⁰⁷

Most vaudeville houses rather unconsciously shifted toward a format somewhat similar to vaudefilm as the popularity of the lower-priced, increasingly inventive cinema reached stratospheric heights. By 1927, four of the nine acts in Keith's premiere New York theatre were stand-alone films; by 1928, only four

⁶⁰⁶ George Gottlieb, "Psychology of the American Vaudeville Show from the Point of View of its Managers," ed. Charles W. Stein, *American Vaudeville as Seen by it's Contemporaries* (New York: Knopf, 1984) 181.

⁶⁰⁷ The performers had not done much to arrest the slide. In the early 1920s, headliners such as Pat Rooney II often shifted their attention from the quietly faltering vaudeville circuits, which provided longer-term but lower-paying contracts, to play brief but enriching turns at the new "first-class" picture houses. "35 Picture Houses Play Headline Acts." *Variety*. Vol. LXV. No. 5 (23 December 1921).

American vaudeville theatres did not include some type of film within their bills.⁶⁰⁸ Even a vaudeville embracing this staggeringly high degree of films within the traditionally live bill, however, lay open to the inescapably higher prices encountered in live performance. Stage hands, theatrical lighting, bookers, full orchestra, vaudevillians themselves—all cost money. Historian Jack Robinson estimates that even the most balanced vaudeville/film house could cut overhead by 75% by eliminating the live stage shows.⁶⁰⁹ Longtime theatrical manager M.B. Leavitt, writing in 1912, foresaw film’s “permanent sustenance” within vaudeville. Economics, Leavitt felt, militated against a return to live performance. Film, after all, “takes the place of many performers” for a fraction of the overhead.⁶¹⁰

For a business whose public face had been the live performer, vaudeville’s shift in spectatorship schemas left many cold. Former advance agent and performer Milton Middleton gazed upon desiccated ground when he looked into the rising cinema palaces, deserts that could not help but stir the desire for the vibrant life and invigorating interactivity enjoyed between an audience and a live performer.

[Motion pictures] have but whetted the appetite for the marvelous human element that we have tried so long to “kid” ourselves into believing we could do without. We long to hiss the villain, applaud the hero and make eyes at the pretty girls. A skipping “shadow sweetheart” is provocative and not at all satisfying.

Middleton notes the unanswerable provocation embedded within the vaudeville audience’s confrontation with film. The invitation, in which chronotopic disjuncture between live consumption and cinema denies vaudeville’s traditional consummation,

⁶⁰⁸ Program, Keith’s Eighty-First Street Theatre (New York) 21 Feb. 1927. Robert Snyder, *The Voice of the City: Vaudeville and Popular Culture in New York* (New York: Oxford UP, 1989) 158.

⁶⁰⁹ Jack Robinson, qtd. in Marsh 27.

⁶¹⁰ M.B. Leavitt, qtd. in Snyder 158-159.

could not but remain unanswered. The corruption of the relationship between performer and spectator, Middleton argues, began with a management, in fevered search for any salable vogue, which had allowed the wolf through the door of the theatre. “As soon as the menace began to assume serious shape,” the frustrated former performer concludes, ‘sleeping sickness’ became contagious....”⁶¹¹

Brooks Atkinson, trying well into the 1930s to explain “what’s wrong with vaudeville,” quickly isolated technological mediation as the pernicious force that had sundered spectator from performer. Arguing that vaudeville “has a special technique that cannot be trifled with,” the theatre critic found technology had interfered with the “free, bold, crisp, and dynamic showmanship” that had created the “authority of an honest performer” in classic vaudeville. Atkinson envisions “no substitute for the spontaneity of the human being” on vaudeville’s stages. Technologically mediated performance, he concludes, fails performer and spectator alike. Bound to a chronotope outside the sculpting influence of his own real-time presence, the vaudevillian is “no longer a performer but a robot and only the simulacrum of a free man.” As well, Atkinson recognizes the shift precludes the audience’s agency to an extent that renders its continued presence beside the point. In the end, he decides, “the audience of such a show ... might as well be at home—in fact would be better off at home.”⁶¹²

Many also recognized that the expertise trumpeted by vaudeville arrived with authority only because live performance carried the possibility of failure. Plate-spinners dropped their properties, operatic voices faltered, and jokes fell flat. Vaudeville critic Winifred Ward, writing in 1922, lauds vaudeville’s chance-ridden pursuit for perfection as its great strength. Joyously recalling a particularly expert act

⁶¹¹ Milton T. Middleton, “Restoring the One-Night Stands,” *Billboard* 05 May 1930: 82.

⁶¹² Brooks Atkinson, “Show Personality,” *New York Times* 05 Mar. 1939.

in which a young girl stood on the shoulders of a performer perched on the shoulders of yet another man (himself balanced on horseback), she reminds her readers that “to realize the perfection of balance it implies you must see it fail, as I did once.” Ward, remembering the sight of the girl’s “sudden fall with a smothered shriek down that dizzying height,” paints, in the purple prose of 1920s journalism, a picture of “the plucky little thing climb[ing] inch by inch back to her perilous post...” The “thunderous applause” greeting the girl’s reattainment of her wavering summit, Ward decides, confirms that perfection in vaudeville reaches its zenith only when it is “lost and gained right there before your eyes.”⁶¹³

Early film audiences in the vaudeville house, seeking this presence of chance (that, in turn, validated their role as event witness), battered against the unchanging, iterative nature of film “performance.” Finding no alteration in each successive film turn, turn-of-the-century vaudeville spectators had, remember, instead fixated upon even the minutest differences in projection itself, asserting their juridical function against the brightness of the bulb, the griminess of the lens, or the ability of the projectionist to operate his machinery. Elegantly pulling projection into the arena of live performance, such adjudications attempted to concretize vaudeville spectatorship around mutable, evolving events placed within a communal time and space of possibility and agency. As film production and projection increased in expertise, such fissures disappeared. Recognizing this, another critic hoped film would content itself with putting its archival powers in the interests of live performance. “Motion pictures,” he reasoned, could then settle comfortably into a subsidiary role but “constitute a permanent record of the stage that will be more satisfactory than still photograph.”⁶¹⁴

⁶¹³ Winifred Ward, “Inside Secrets About Your Favorite Vaudeville Star,” *Philadelphia Public Ledger* 13 Aug. 1922: 6.

⁶¹⁴ Levy 79.

I do not mean to frame the spectatorship of live performers that had defined classic vaudeville in a wholly uncritical light. Certainly, any viewership model that depended upon communal digestion within highly codified rules of decorum enforced upon the spectator a certain injurious early massification. As Viadim Liapunov aptly notes, Bakhtin's prizing of the "signed" deed carries a concomitant valuation of the "singularity and uniqueness" of the "*particular individual* at this particular time and in this particular place."⁶¹⁵ (Emphasis mine.) Indeed, vaudeville audiences in mid to late Progressivism appear to have been hard in the midst of the anesthetizing collectivization that would be hastened by film spectatorship. Managers, audiences, and vaudevillians all understood divisions of class, gender, race, and ethnicity to function as determinative factors in enabling productive interactivity. As well, as Phillip Auslander has argued of the relationship between recorded rock music and live rock concerts, the shift in spectatorship allowed audiences to understand Benjaminian authenticity within their own lives as arriving through "dialectical or symbiotic relationships between live and mediatized representations...."⁶¹⁶ One 1912 San Francisco review enthused over a bill that included a motion picture of William Howard Taft opening the city's recent Pacific-Panama Exposition.. Finally finding "an exceptionally clear" motion picture, the reviewer encouraged his readers to spend the film looking for themselves in the "immense throng" that greeted the cinematic Taft.⁶¹⁷

Though the ontology of authenticity so well mined and deployed by Phelan suffers in Auslander's sometimes problematic construction, it seems inarguable that audiences, if beggared by the loss of Phelan's rightly prized transgressive

⁶¹⁵ Viadim Liapunov, qtd. in Deborah J. Haynes, *Bakhtin and the Visual Arts* (new York: Cambridge UP, 1995) 54.

⁶¹⁶ Phillip Auslander, *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

⁶¹⁷ "President Scores Hit in Silent Act; Audience Enthuses over Noted Comedian's Son." *San Francisco Evening Post* 20 Nov.1911.

performativity, realized critically important tools of mapping their individual lives and social desires out against mass culture's supposedly authoritative narratives. As the remark about the Taft actuality makes clear, audiences enthusiastically embraced any cinematic moment that stamped their own community or interests as distinct and remarkable from other urban centers. Another San Francisco critic commented that the Taft actuality was "cheered wildly" by the native crowd. As a result, the pictures became "the real feature of the new program, although Pat Rooney II and Marion Bent [a renowned vaudeville duo] were billed as the headliners."⁶¹⁸ In effect, the audience members—scanning the flickering San Francisco crowd for their own faces—displaced Rooney and Bent. If the looming massification of urban entertainment would destroy vaudeville's emphasis on localism and neighborhoods, such grasping played no small part in preserving a degree of difference.

And yet, the transition in spectatorship also irredeemably wounded the productive presence of the vaudeville audience. Audiences lost the effective assertion of willed action in real-time collaboration, a necessary step in the looming massification that would soon be furthered by radio, film, and television. Rather than assert an effective deed with a capability to alter and create what Bakhtin called the "unrepeatable unity of real life," audiences necessarily confronted film with an adjudication that precluded alteration. Unlike vaudevillians, prey to the interruptive audience, film, writes Adorno

has already taken care that the conflicts are not conflicts at all. In so far as the individual images are played past in an uninterrupted photographic series on the screen they have become mere objects in advance. Subsumed as they are, they pass us impotently by.⁶¹⁹

⁶¹⁸ "Motion Pictures of City Seems Popular" (Orpheum Theatre), *San Francisco Bulletin*, 20 Nov. 1911.

⁶¹⁹ Theodor Adorno, "The Schema of Mass Culture," *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture* ed. J.M. Bernstein. (London: Routledge, 1991) 62.

The “transitiveness and open-eventness” Bakhtin finds inherent to a productive subject thus fruitlessly flutters against the cinematic partition until, exhausted by its efforts to engage in production with a sealed form, it collapses, exhausted, back into a position of reception. The final gesture of resistance, in which one interrupts other-time by stopping the progression of the film, presents two options: darken the projector or immolate the product. Lost was the “instant of actuality” and “responsive[ness] to representations of life” one 1903 editor found at the core of vaudeville’s appeal.⁶²⁰

Surrendered in the demise of the form, too, was an ethos of productive interaction that had bound together the disparate economic classes whose individual articulations defined developing American “taste cultures.” As the costs of film and radio (and later television) attendance remained low while the cost of live performance climbed (with the lessening of theatrical tours and collapse of vaudeville chains), live performance itself became an increasingly classed activity. Writing in 1910, Levy reassured readers vaudeville remained safe from collapse. “I am no prophet,” he warned (in something of an understatement), “but one thing seems certain, and that is that vaudeville will always be with us if for no other reason than its cheapness. In these difficult times there are few people who care to pay two dollars for an orchestra seat at a musical show.”⁶²¹ Unsurprisingly, in a medium whose national spread had begun with a nomenclatural nod to its low price (the “nickelodeon”), film became the entertainment of choice for working class Americans. Earlier, vaudeville, like other popular entertainments, had depended upon the same price differential to keep working class patrons, but also enabled middle and upper class audience members to join the working class adherents of its predecessor, variety, by publicly sanctifying its halls with polite culture. In return, the working class brought with it a tradition of

⁶²⁰ “Editor’s Easy Chair,” *Harper’s* Vol. CVI, No. 635 (Apr. 1903) 812, 815.

⁶²¹ Levy 75.

interactive spectatorship—one centered on the authenticity of the performer—that would prove a remarkably apt model for the middle class’s Progressive reforms.

As economic considerations pushed working class members away from live performance, theatrical performance in America underwent three fundamental shifts. First, with the notable and uncharacteristic exception of 1930s workers’ theatre, the authorial designation of the performance detached from the spectator-performer relationship and lodged within the persona of the playwright, there to remain until the late 1960s, when the calculation of happenings gave way to the more spontaneous audience contributions valued by environmental theatre. Second, the change in audience composition ensured that high culture in performance (e.g., Shakespeare, string quartets) transferred almost wholly to the sanctioning patronage of wealthier spectators. From the death of a popular genre that had consistently offered Verdi arias alongside yodels, American culture inherited a profound and lasting cultural gap between “highbrow” and “lowbrow.” (Historian Lawrence Levine recalls his shock, only six decades after vaudeville’s withering, that “almost sacred” culture had once ever been “popular.”⁶²²) Finally the absenting of working class audience members and subsequent dominance of middle and upper class from live performance helped complete American theatrical performance’s shift away from more directly advocative work toward less politically direct social and psychological realism. Post-vaudeville American performance represents a radical departure from nineteenth century performances’ absorption with actionable matters of systemic inequality. Certainly, the rise of playwrights such as Arthur Miller resulted from a host of forces within the theatre and its surrounding cultural, scholarly and economic bodies, but one must nevertheless note the profound impact of a theatergoing populace that now had far less

⁶²² Lawrence Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1988) 4.

reason to reorder the foundations of an economy or system of laws so amenable to its success. Those with the most reason to act, after all, could no longer afford to do so.

The decade that witnessed vaudeville collapse under the weight of competition from stand-alone cinema houses also experienced a rapid decline in voting. The drop was significant and a cause of alarm for political scientists, historians, and professional politicians in the 1920s. Voter turnout fell across the board. Disenfranchisement of African American voters in the South makes it impossible to gauge the statistics there with anything close to a guess of what role apathy played, but even in the North, where disenfranchisement was far less of an issue, the percentage of eligible citizens casting a vote declined greatly. During the late 1890s, a period that witnessed the continued explosion of both vaudeville and Progressive politics and the barest debut of American film, 83% of those eligible had voted in a presidential election; by 1924, with both vaudeville and Progressivism in decline and film in its ascendancy, the number had slumped to a meager 58%.⁶²³

Most blamed the low turnout on simple apathy, a condition in the American voter that would have been remarkable a generation earlier.⁶²⁴ Sometime, somewhere, since 1896, it seemed, Americans had become disinclined to exercise their ability to refashion their government in the most direct manner available to them. Other observers placed the blame for plummeting turnout on professional politics' newfound dependency on impersonal means of engaging voters. "Projecting the politician's personality through all the devices of modern communication," most found, "offered only a false sense of intimacy, an illusory community."⁶²⁵ Sundered from an intimate connection to leaders with whom they imagined a personal relationship, voters,

⁶²³ Michael E. McGerr, *The Decline of Popular Politics: The American North, 1865-1928* (New York: Oxford UP, 1986) 186.

⁶²⁴ McGerr 185-187.

⁶²⁵ McGerr 182.

convinced of the pointlessness of voting at all, simply recused themselves from the ballot box. Most insidiously, the trend was far more pronounced among women and younger voters, both members of recently enfranchised groups. It had been their historic misfortune to gain the vote at the precise moment when many in the population had begun wondering if the exercise of individual agency in the service of collective action served any purpose at all. As vaudeville had earlier trained them for interrogation, I would argue, it had now, in its death throes, trained them for shrugging repose.

Two presidents, Theodore Roosevelt and Calvin Coolidge, properly bookend the period of film's greatest influence in vaudeville. Ever the activist, TR—whose rim-shot of a nickname itself demonstrates an interest in George M. Cohan's vaudeville maxim: “speed, kid, plenty of speed”—engaged the day through his famously muscular brand of interruptive agency. Roosevelt's engrossment with activity (often for the sake of activity) did not always lead to the just society sought by his contemporary Progressives. His years in the White House included a radical refutation of McKinley's laxness toward the trusts, true, but also the first full flowering of American imperialism. Still, Roosevelt's insistence on a citizenry “shaping” the nation, rather than simply inheriting it, placed him rather squarely in the midst of vaudeville's aesthetic. It seems only natural, therefore, that his bursts of purposeful activity and raw energy led some to view him as reflecting the principles of the nation's most popular form of entertainment. The citizens had, after all, elected both vaudeville and Roosevelt to serve the nation and had received uncommon leadership in the bargain. Levy, looking to the “Future of Vaudeville” in one essay, could not help but frame the 1908 election of the jocular but ineffective Taft as a different succession altogether: a passing of the torch from Roosevelt back to vaudeville.

Whatever else may be history's judgment of the one and only Roosevelt, it will have to admit that he put on a grand show. His infinite variety, his vigorous staccato quality, his abrupt transitions from humor to acrobatics are the essence of good vaudeville. For seven years he gave us the type of entertainment that our national temperament craves; now all is quiet once more along the Potomac, and vaudeville is back again in the hands of the professionals.⁶²⁶

If Roosevelt represented the vaudeville that welcomed film, Calvin Coolidge, who left office in 1928 while knowing eulogies for the variety form filled the trades, appears as the fitting symbol for a vaudeville audience enervated by exposure to its adopted medium. Like Roosevelt, Coolidge was an accidental president, as well as another Northeastern governor selected to compliment an Ohio Republican. Beyond peradventure, however, Coolidge's years in office were marked by a political torpor all the more noteworthy for its lodgement in the "roar" of the 1920s. Looking back on "Silent Cal," vaudevillian Will Rogers fled to the talkies that crushed vaudeville under its heel, saddled him with a suitable epigram. "The country wanted nothin' done," Rogers confirmed, "and he done it." Loosed by Pastor in his creation of polite vaudeville, "politeness" and "decency" had compromised audience agency by the time film appeared in the vaudeville theatres. The more gradual, but no less deleterious remodeling of spectatorial production continued under the watchful, obverse gaze of the cinematic lens, a window that offered the promise of congress between event and spectator but remained finally incapable of seeing anything but itself.

⁶²⁶ Levy, "The Future of Vaudeville" 75.

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CONCLUSION

In 1969, Marian Spitzer, completing her history of the Palace Theatre, vaudeville's epicenter during its final years, felt the need to frame the death of vaudeville within the social turmoil she found around her at the height of the Vietnam War.

In times like these, when people in the hundreds of thousands are dying of misery, of famine, of war, of man's inhumanity to man, it seems frivolous to wail over the downfall of a theater, a death of a tradition. But to those who were around at the time, to the performers who lost their livelihood when the Palace [converted to motion pictures], and to those who had been loyal and loving patrons of the Palace for almost two decades, its degradation was a legitimate cause for sorrow.⁶²⁷

Indeed, by 1929 Keith's Palace was the only remaining vaudeville theatre on a Broadway now dominated by legitimate shows and the decade's wildly popular musical comedies. Though frequently disdained by legitimate performers who felt one must "stoop to conquer the vaudeville audience," vaudeville, in its death throes, now found itself the subject of keen and serious critical inquiry.⁶²⁸ Alexander Bakshy, film and drama critic for *The Nation* and a major influence on Kenneth Macgowan, viewed vaudeville's struggles through the eyes of one who, having been born abroad, saw something intrinsically and importantly American about the genre.⁶²⁹ Its lamentable state, the critic of Russian modernism held, removed a vital and essential

⁶²⁷ Marian Spitzer, *The Palace* (New York: Atheneum Books, 1969) 199.

⁶²⁸ Marshall D. Beuick, "The Vaudeville Philosopher," *The Drama*, Vol. 16., No. 3 (Dec. 1925) 116.

⁶²⁹ James Milton Highsmith, "Alexander Bakshy: Pioneering Critic of Drama and Motion Picture," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 29, No. 2 (Winter, 1970), pp. 195.

voice from the national landscape. Most of all, Bakshy worried that a “visitor from other lands,” having “suddenly found himself in Times Square, would hardly suspect the existence in this country of that unique and ancient art.”⁶³⁰ Cinema, found the pioneering film critic, could not serve as a fitting replacement for vaudeville in the national consciousness.

Most targeted the waxing cinema, now a national enterprise in its own right, for the demise of vaudeville and the steady conversion of the treasured “houses of refinement” into motion picture halls. For the prescient in the vaudeville industry, motion pictures had long represented a danger in their midst, albeit one they felt themselves powerless to exclude from the halls; cinema, once a guest at the live performance, had swiftly become a dominant force in national entertainment, one too popular to dismiss from a variety show. As early as the mid-1910s, the height of vaudeville’s popularity, one critic addressed “the menace of the movies” in noting that the “financial alliance of the stage and motion pictures” had progressed to such a degree that “none can deem it unimportant” to the question of vaudeville’s survival.⁶³¹ Certainly, the films in the vaudeville house had grown to occupy a place in the landscape of the performance that many veterans understood to be inimical to the “merry family” assemblage of the traditional variety show. Formerly present as but a single act in a bill, stand-alone films and live acts making use of films occupied a disproportionate length of the performance by 1920, throwing off the bill’s formerly carefully maintained balance. In truth, by the mid-1920s, regardless of what term vaudeville used to address itself, nearly all vaudeville halls might be placed more properly in the new genre of “vaude-film.”

⁶³⁰ Alexander Bakshy, “Vaudeville Must Be Saved,” *Selected Vaudeville Criticism*, ed. Anthony Slide (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 1988) 232.

⁶³¹ Harold Edwards, “The Menace of the Movies,” *American Vaudeville as Seen by Its Contemporaries* (New York: Knopf, 1984) 338.

Some adherents of live variety performance, embittered by their obsolescence and fixated on what they perceived to be Jewish control of feature film production, launched into excoriations whose racial undertones represented the worst of the period's anti-Semitism. Contrasting "the old days [when] Bigtime Vaudeville [was] fat, prosperous, and contemptuous of the movies," one critic scathingly eulogized vaudeville as the tragic hero of its own Passion Play, a victim of "the present movie barons [who] were buttonhole makers, pants pressers, or glove salesmen" before becoming complicit in vaudeville's perishing. (Having watched Cecil B. de Mille's Jesus Christ picture, "The King of Kings," take stage time away from live performers during a vaude-film show, the same critic surmised the purpose of the film "is the re-writing of Holy Writ so as to take away the blame for the Crucifixion from the ancestors of the movie magnates."⁶³²) Others argued that so beloved an institution as vaudeville could never have been intentionally abandoned. "American theatre audiences," elaborated Philip Sterling, "long accustomed to taking what is granted to them have scarcely paid scant attention to the rapid disappearance of vaudeville from the popular stage...."⁶³³

Others, however, understood that vaudeville had some complicity in its swiftly worsening state. That it had welcomed film, a medium whose viewership schema proved wholly at odds with vaudeville's traditional mode of spectatorship, is both understandable and forgivable. Vaudeville had founded itself, in part, on its ability to swiftly incorporate points of national interest—be they persons, events, or fads—into the evening's bill. Excluding film not only would have proven foolhardy, given cinema's capturing of the nation's interest, but would have compromised vaudeville's facility to interact with and comment upon whatsoever might grip the country's fancy

⁶³² W.A.S Douglas, "The Passing of Vaudeville," *American Mercury* (Oct. 1927): 189.

⁶³³ Phillip Sterling, "Vaudeville Fights the Death Sentence," *New Theatre*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (Feb. 1936) 17.

or rouse its interest. Nonetheless, vaudeville managers failed to check the viral growth of film throughout the bill, a task at which they had proven so adept over the preceding decades when the moderation involved other types of acts. Despite the dance craze of the late 1910s or the vogue for playlets at the turn-of-the-century, for example, managers and their booking office had carefully maintained an evenly balanced, diverse bill of entertainments. In allowing film to infiltrate nearly every portion of the bill, the managers and bookers compromised one of vaudeville's most salable and frequently lauded aspects. In the coming battle for the nation's patronage, it would be one of among a handful of fatal miscalculations.

Vaudeville's sheer size and rapid spread also played a key role in its shrinking audience. During the 1890s, the relatively modest base of vaudeville theatre could support shows with a strong pool of performers: holdovers from the old variety days, European imports, celebrities from non-performing walks of life, and stars imported from other genres of performance. When the genre exploded in popularity, the new performance opportunities fueled a similar increase in the number of available performers. Long considered the bane of polite society, the American performer now respectably entertained all strata of socio-economic classes in a multitude of theatre environments. As well, the huge (and highly publicized) increase in salaries lessened the shame of working in variety entertainment, an evolution hastened by the presence of non-performing celebrity acts such as Helen Keller and Carrie Nation. Americans with no familial or previous professional link to the theatre joined the growing army of vaudevillians, providing a large, national, and varied pool of performers. The industry needed them. Bakshy, writing in 1927, estimates that vaudeville depended upon the efforts of 50,000 performers to maintain its current theatres (this in a time of decline).⁶³⁴

⁶³⁴ Bakshy, "Vaudeville Must Be Saved" 234.

There was, however, a limit to the scope and depth of this class of professionals. Unlike their counterparts in other national corporate enterprises (e.g., railroad, steel), vaudevillians were not rudimentarily skilled day labors, easily trained and ultimately expendable. Rather, the skilled vaudevillian, by her very nature, represented a figure with years of professional experience and performance refinement. Not only did they have to meet the standards of excellence within their specialty (e.g., being able to juggle at a high skill level), vaudevillians also spent years learning to play across a national fan base, work with an interactive audience, and change their acts based on the demands of the bill. As vaudeville grew out of its northeastern urban base to become a national industry the genre simply found itself lacking enough highly skilled performers to make a “palpable hit” each time they stepped on stage. To accommodate this need, the industry necessarily employed thousands of underskilled acts with too few years of seasoning and honing in small-time vaudeville. By the late 1920s, Bakshy, in yet another call for the redemption of the vaudeville stage, finds it lamentably “blighted by artistic decay....”⁶³⁵ The situation was only exacerbated by the increasing tendency of cinema and musical comedy to lure away the most expert and popular vaudevillians with enormous contracts for fewer hours of work.

Vaudeville also erred by ignoring its own early insistence that an appreciation of novelty fire its acts. The audience’s over-familiarity with certain acts and lines of business was, in many respects, inevitable. Variations that had seemed “as fresh as the Garden of Eden” in 1889 had now become as fossilized as their variety hall forbearers. Breaking in a new act, an expensive and time-consuming proposition that involved weeks in smaller theatres, was often a last resort for some performers who had toured

⁶³⁵ Alexander Bakshy, “Vaudeville’s Prestige,” *Selected Vaudeville Criticism*, ed. Anthony Slide (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 1988) 236.

in perfect happiness with the same material for years at a stretch. As well, vaudeville itself, originally a molten amalgam of many performance traditions, had developed a common performance style by the early part of the twentieth-century. Critic George Jean Nathan's "Ten Commandments of Vaudeville" (previously discussed in Chapter 1) only worked as a comedic device because of the very real possibility that one might chisel out a handful of performance maxims that would suit any act. By 1918 one New York reviewer sighed contentedly that a songstress's lack of experience in vaudeville at least made her "guiltless of vaudeville mannerisms."⁶³⁶ Films, arriving at what seemed (and often was) a daily rate and searchingly playing with myriad aesthetics, suddenly began to trump many live performers in their willingness to seek the novel. In 1935, following a meeting discussing the rebirth of vaudeville, one producer of amateur variety pointed the finger of blame squarely at such studiously unadventurous performers.

Aside from recent depressing financial conditions, vaudeville has also suffered a severe blow because its routines have become trite and threadbare through repetition. With the same faces going through routines season after season, the audiences become infinitely weary of it all and show their attitude with the only weapon at their command, the box office."⁶³⁷

Though novelty and topicality continued to heat the wares of the vaudeville stage, it is undeniable that the flames dulled to embers as the form matured. In part, this represented the genre's continual struggle between appreciation of innovation and ease of commerce. Innovation, best represented in novel types of acts and fluid intercalation of topical events into long-standing routines, ensured performers of repeated bookings at theatres and helped them rouse the audience to an enthusiastic

⁶³⁶ "Pearls" at the Palace," *New York Tribune*, 15 Jan. 1918.

⁶³⁷ Ray Perkins, "Amateur Performances," *New York Times*, 20 Oct. 1935.

(and profitable) embrace of the new. Acts that wished to maintain lengthy careers in the relatively few theatres that comprised the big time therefore had to innovate and incorporate new material and methods to survive. Absent this, a performer could only wait for the type of death sentence a 1903 manager delivered to the central corporate office. Recommending that a stale act not be engaged again, the manager observed that during the comedian's performance in Philadelphia the act "had nothing new to offer and offered it."⁶³⁸

Yet innovation also often required a heavy investment of resources on the part of the performer. New playlets—in later years, often commissioned from an expensive independent writer—required financial outlay as did the new sets and costumes that "glam acts" such as Annette Kellerman (the previously discussed diver) felt forced to adopt. Additionally, extensive changes in material usually required time touring in the smaller, less prestigious, and poorer paying theatres of the small time. As vaudeville's corporate structure became ever more intricate, the industry became less tolerant of acts that could not deliver consistently and immediately to the audience's satisfaction. The mature form therefore actively encouraged performers to pursue two divergent paths: one that led to new, costly, and potentially exciting innovation; and one that discouraged change by instituting systemic disadvantages. Ungainly straddling these two, vaudevillians, in their genre's fading years, increasingly surrendered one of the form's most invigorating aspects for the sake of short-term profit. Though the vaudeville theatre continued to recommend novelty and topicality to its audiences' attention, the undeniable weakening of these strains during the 1920s played a role in its demise.

⁶³⁸ H.A. Daniels, Manager's Report (Philadelphia), 16 Feb. 1903, Keith-Albee Archives, University of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa.

Many well attended (if fruitless) meetings about vaudeville's "revival" continued to occur with diminishing frequency well into the 1940s, but the prospects for its formal return disappeared with the supporting apparatus of the chains in the late 1920s. Some, like Nathan, an intimate and champion of Eugene O'Neill, contended that vaudeville, despite all appearances, had not died but had been absorbed by the larger American cultural body. Locating its strains and influences during the late 1930s in everything from Harlem nightclubs to Broadway musicals, Nathan—who earlier in the same article accomplishes the neat trick of denying vaudeville was alive during its height of popularity—pronounces, "If vaudeville is dead, it certainly is the damndest zombie that has walked the night in a long time."⁶³⁹

For those who loved vaudeville in person or admire it from an historical distance, Nathan's inclination is both understandable and oddly comforting. The relatively sudden passing of vaudeville from daily American life—during the 1920s it went from being the world's highest paying profession to nearly moribund—represented to many the heartache and at least a handful of the thousand natural shocks that modern American life is heir to.⁶⁴⁰ Those twenty-first century critics who speak of Bill Irwin or David Shiner (against their will) as "New Vaudevillians" search for a vanished ethos of madcap foolishness, interactive spectatorship, and seeming spontaneity in performance. Recent studies of Buster Keaton that attempt to locate his film comedies within a "vaudeville aesthetic" seek to honor an entertainment long since passed by suggesting one of its most famous sons mined it for his greatest work.⁶⁴¹ Perhaps fittingly, television, in its 1950s heyday of the "Texaco Star Theatre," "Your Show of Shows," and "The Ed Sullivan Show," utilized the variety

⁶³⁹ George Jean Nathan, "A Matter of Life and Death," *Theater Week*, 17. Apr. 1939.

⁶⁴⁰ John DiMeglio, *Vaudeville, U.S.A.* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1973) 11-12.

⁶⁴¹ See in particular Robert Knopf, *The Theater and Cinema of Buster Keaton* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1999) and Marion Meade, *Buster Keaton: Cut to the Chase* (New York: Da Capo, 1997).

format perfected by vaudeville to lure many away from the movie houses that had sprung up after vaudeville's passing.

All of these feints toward resistance, however, mistake certain attractive or evocative elements of the form—baggy pants, rapid pace, heavily accented tomfoolery—for the huge and complicated nexus of business, content, and liveness that defined vaudeville *sum tota*. As I have argued, vaudeville represented a carefully calibrated balance between commercial avarice and corporate citizenship, between erudition and rank silliness, and between the comfortingly familiar and the startlingly new. One simply cannot tease apart a single thread from the inestimably complex warp and weft of historically particularized performance, audience, environment, and commercial structure and call it “vaudeville” with any degree of accuracy.

This is particularly true because vaudeville, I believe, functioned as a helpmeet to the Progressive reforms that occupied most of its existence from the early 1880s to the late 1920s. The genre at large, being a racist trust peopled with frankly avaricious glory hounds, was not a purposeful agent of these reforms. Rather, it presented a venue and manner of performance in which the issues at the heart of Progressive concerns could find a voice, be it in concord or combat, with the more dominant national tropes of American exceptionalism and limitless economic opportunity. The content aspect of many acts featured many of the day's greatest social ills and most marked cases of deprivation. Hungry men sang to their last nickel. Country lovers found that the big city would grind them up. Women battled workplace inequity and objectification. All of these fine targets of Progressive zeal, of course, took place alongside contrapositional reactionary fare. As well, the genre, in its content, business practices, and audience segregation replicated and furthered some of the more socially brutal elements of modern American racism. It is hard to imagine an African American child, having been forced to buy a ticket at a separate window, enter

through a separate door, and sit in distant, segregated seating, only to watch a white actor in burnt cork enact a parody of her, found much invigorating about a piece's social commitment. Instead, because the genre welcomed an astounding, though not limitless, array of acts and concerns, the nation gained a venue in which actual contestation, adjudicated through ticket sales, interaction, and manager's reports, could finally occur.

In part, this affinity for discussing social and economic reform arose through the backgrounds and professional lives of the performers themselves. Most vaudevillians came from humble backgrounds, and used the financial opportunities promised by the wildly popular form to try and found a more normal life elsewhere. The great majority of vaudevillians lived remarkably routine lives, spending most of their time working on acts, traveling to engagements, and performing. They were frequently overworked—hence the strong identification with common laborers—and existed, contract to contract, at the whim of booking agents and managers. “Many of them are middle-aged men and women,” one 1902 correspondent informed his readers, “and some have passed that milestone. Their lives have been sanctified and rounded out but very little by the saving grace of home....”⁶⁴² One of the starkest memories of my archival work was reading a letter from a performer to a booker begging for help in securing even split-week engagements (three days at one theatre, followed by three days at the next), only to turn the page and find a lengthy packing list for the possible journey. Even “success” in his field would find him working dozens of small theatres across the Midwest for what would have amounted to a very low wage. When Progressive reformers such as the van Horst sisters spoke of the need to live among the people before one could understand their condition, they were speaking of the bulk of the vaudevillians. When they staged routines that addressed

⁶⁴² Newspaper article, “In Vaudeville Land,” *New York Times*, 22 Dec. 1901.

such issues or lampooned the hegemony, they became muckraking journalists of the stage. Where the managers were ultimately circumscribed by what Progressive era historian Walter Weyl terms the “humbleness of its merely pecuniary ambitions,” vaudevillians, partly out of their voracious need for new material and partly due to their own sense of struggle against corporate overlords, often teased apart the common person who lay at the heart of Progressive reforms.⁶⁴³

This performer, intent upon continually harvesting daily life for fresh material, depended upon an audience invested in such exploration and insistent upon the performer’s expertise. The corporate overlords who monitored and regulated performances, bookings, and personnel implicitly licensed interruption of these activities with the understanding that the rejuvenation of the form and its connection with patrons constituted their most salable characteristics. Also, the audience relied upon and promulgated the national myth of respectability that excused their presence in theatres marked by highly political and often salacious fare. The “accidental” eruptions in live performance, those moments in which tightly regulated codes of comportment binding spectator, performer, and manager snapped and then rebounded in altered form, demanded the full force of vaudeville’s surrounding culture to achieve their undeniable effects.

Vaudeville’s sins—segregated theatres, inadequately invested subject positions for women performers, continued use of ethnic stereotypes—were manifest and grievous. Certainly, no one should imagine my conclusion to this project—perhaps a bit of a eulogy in its own right—to mourn the passing of an entertainment that continually bettered its audiences and its era. When vaudeville erred, as with its adoption of minstrelsy’s blackface, its scope allowed it to injure on a scale and yet

⁶⁴³ Walter Weyl, *The New Democracy: An Essay on Certain Political and Economic Tendencies in the United States* (New York: MacMillan, 1913) 154.

with a degree of ritualized subtlety that scarred millions. Yet if many of the voices and corporate structures scorched as frequently as others invigorated, vaudeville's rancorous insistence on difference, diversity, and novelty welcomed myriad subjects and treatments to the stage. Blackface numbers shared the bill with anti-lynching songs. Paternalistic sentimental ballads followed female mathematicians entertaining with rapid-fire computations.

All of this, of course, played out during the tense struggle between fierce engagement and blinkered passivity that would define the age and its struggle toward reform and social equity. As Rosemary Bank has argued of the usurpation of the elite Park Theatre's prominence by the working class Bowery Theatre in the early nineteenth-century, the flowering of agency within the matrix of antebellum performance, soon to be lost within realism, signaled a crucial and historically specific counter-hegemonic turn in American performance. Progressivism, a series of allied movements that would depend upon such counter-hegemonic action, would have to look elsewhere than the legitimate theatre for spectator behavior that could serve as both model and training ground for its foot soldiers. Ultimately, the variety house preserved this mode of interactive authorship until vaudeville could engage a broad spectrum of economic classes.

Moreover, the shift in audience dynamics in the legitimate houses meant that vaudeville constituted one of the primary places in which spectators could still flex their ability to co-author the performance event. The audience's displacement from a position in which, through interaction, they co-authored the event to one in which they simply consumed it played out most strikingly in the rigid orthodoxy of American realism. It was, in the late nineteenth-century, a genre in which the play was understood as "not heard but overheard," to set aright John Gassner's phrase. "This principle," observes Brenda Murphy, mandates "the rejection of any aspect of the

dramatic medium that is reflexive, that shatters the fourth-wall illusion....”⁶⁴⁴

Murphy’s lost reflexivity connected the stage performance to itself, certainly, but also linked the spectator with performer in muscular interchange of ideas and actions.

Within the schema of American realism, interactivity could only re-place the spectator into a familiar but now forbidden role: actor.⁶⁴⁵ In this radical change to what Bruce McConachie calls the nineteenth-century “rhetoric of playgoing,” audience members, stripped of an ability to more fully participate in the production, rather than reception, of the performance lapsed into “a discreet silence mixed with voyeuristic delight.”⁶⁴⁶

What Richard Butsch finds as the “right to exercise sovereignty over [the] performances” continued to invigorate vaudeville audiences throughout the genre’s history.⁶⁴⁷ Most importantly, this life span synchronized vaudeville almost completely with the efforts of Progressivism. As vaudeville proved the era’s most popular entertainment—as well as the prototypical example of cross-class performance—the form was able to gift reformers with an audience trained nightly in the pursuit of its own desires and individual critical opinions. As well, vaudeville playhouses rooted themselves as important points of resistance against more complete massification of American culture in the early twentieth-century. At a point when regularization, standardization, and commonality gripped industries ranging from railroad to cinema, each vaudeville house managed to maintain a peculiar connection to its local

⁶⁴⁴ Brenda Murphy, *American Realism and American Drama, 1880-1940* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1987) 29.

⁶⁴⁵ Some plays, such as Clifford Odets’s *Waiting for Lefty* or Thornton Wilder’s *Our Town*, later interrogated the now well established means of realistic viewership through the use of an old vaudeville trick: a “house man,” or audience plant. Many pieces of the radical labor theatre also attempted to so critique received modes of viewership. By the time such devices were regularly employed, however, the meaning of the house man/plant had become inverted. In vaudeville, the disruption of the house man was found in the sudden arise of scripted action within the free audience. In realistic theatre, the moment of disjuncture occurred when someone violated the repose of the audience and unexpectedly acted. The first found prescription humorous, the second jolted itself with the concept of the now-vanished active spectator.

⁶⁴⁶ McConachie 48.

⁶⁴⁷ Richard Butsch, *The Making of American Audiences: From Stage to Television, 1750-1990* (New York: Cambridge UP, 2000) 58-59.

neighborhood and larger civic community. Performers quickly adapted jokes that had played well in Cleveland when Detroiters offered only tepid chuckles. Routines targeted local politicians, hotels, or notable figures after scanning the local papers. An appreciation for the novel fed this journalistic bent. In a nation that came to depend upon searching exposés and timely jeremiads for econo-cultural redress, vaudeville's insistence on placing the new ever at the fore of its concerns—though to a lesser extent in its later years—fanned the embers of Jacksonian engagement with an informed, opinionated public.

Moreover, vaudeville flourished as the only national, corporate industry in which consumers, laborers, and owners met in a public, complex, and highly triangulated relationship. At various moments, vaudevillians used the morality codes of the owners and managers as a shield against clamoring for more risqué material or as barriers to be gleefully and artfully shattered during performances. The managerial class, itself awkwardly caught between owners and audience members, usually found itself helpless and fuming in the wings when unlicensed eruptions re-authored the carefully planned entertainment. Once begun, the performance was rarely halted, but instead existed in a fluid but monitored reciprocal relationship between performer and spectator. This onward eventness of being, to use Bakhtin's phrase, therefore permitted a greater degree of real-time critique than would prove possible in succeeding media.

As well, as extant records make clear, no party in this combat could claim the upper hand: owners and managers both disciplined and depended upon audience approbation; vaudevillians tweaked management for a good laugh (or out of genuine grievance) but begged for bookings; and spectators idolized the very performers they mercilessly guyed, while promulgating the myths of the managers against whom they colluded with the performers. At a time when the nation's interest fixedly turned

toward the complicated relationship between consolidated capital, the labor force, and the disciplining power of national corporations, vaudeville housed discussions more charged and authentic than those found in trust-ridden national politics and more nuanced than those contained in the period's socialist tracts.

As I discussed in Chapter 4 and earlier in this conclusion, the reasons for vaudeville's demise are at once countless and yet often difficult to define. Ultimately, of course, vaudeville finally disappeared because cinema provided evolutionary advancements in many of the commercial innovations that had fueled vaudeville's own explosive growth: national distribution of product; novelty; rapid turn-over of goods; commodious, well-appointed theatres; continual playing times; inexpensiveness; and variety. Closer to the heart of this project, I argue that what passed with vaudeville's demise was a national culture of live entertainment that joined excitingly variegated parties together in the communal act of exercising socio-political agency during performance. Though the nation has had brief spurts of such forms in the succeeding decades—jam bands of the late-1960s and stand-up comedy of the mid-1970s come to mind—none has had vaudeville's cultural reach. As such, the 1920s was the last time when the entire nation wrestled with presentations of political fare leavened with inconsequential frippery, when members of countless sub-cultures nightly consumed both opera and patter comedy, and when they did so in a real-time environment in which their presence marked them as important producers of cultural meaning. At a period when modern society, invigorated and yet still at sea in a world of social networking, blogs, and the twenty-four hour news cycle, I find it instructive to return to a genre that lodged itself so dominantly in so many vital arguments of the day. As an historian of theatre—and therefore an interrogator of presence and liveness—I find vaudeville to be the most brilliant example of social discussion, breadth of concern, and valuation of productivity in America's still

relatively short history of entertainments. Through a thorough examination of what remains our nation's most historically popular live entertainment, I hope we reclaim a sense that live, popular art can stride widely in essential discussions, and that the occurrence of such events are pregnant with possibility.

Frank Fay, famed vaudeville monologist and comedian, is now best remembered as the original Elwood P. Dowd in the 1944 Broadway production of *Harvey*. In the more familiar climes afforded him earlier by vaudeville, Fay, though delicately remembered after his death as “a troupers’ trouper” in *Variety*, the vaudeville bible, would have been seen as an odd choice for the gentle Dowd. Renowned for his “arrogance, drinking, and sharp tongue,” the venomous Fay left a trail of enemies in the wake of his countless vaudeville appearances. One night in 1918 he made the fidgeting audience wait in silence for several minutes until he was satisfied with the knot in his tie, a move that cost him his circuit contract. In 1919 he raked Olga Petrova, the bill’s headliner, over the coals by burlesquing her throughout his own turn. Following a brief film career and very public divorce, Fay found himself residing alone in a grand Hollywood mansion in 1939, living with a bone dry swimming pool, and downing cup upon cup of coffee to keep at bay the alcohol that had formerly increased his already vile temper. Amidst his apparently tortuous solitude in southern California, Fay, who had first abused and then, like so many of his fellow performers, abandoned vaudeville, began to plot out a return to the roiling houses and quick interplay that had led *Variety* to grudgingly appraise him as “a whole power house” in the mid-1920s. Wealthy and sober, but hungering for the days when he and his “two stooges” (audience plants whom he insulted and abused) played across the breadth of the auditorium in front of a live audience,⁶⁴⁸ the former vaudevillian announced “another attempt at reviving vaudeville.” He and other former stars would

⁶⁴⁸ Anthony Slide, *The Vaudevillians* (Westport, CT: Arlington House, 1981) 49-50.

reunite in New York City in a comparatively low-priced show. Though his last engagement in vaudeville had been in the ornate Palace Theatre with a private dressing room and resplendent surroundings, Fay simply desired his audience back. “Nothing pretentious,” he requested, “nothing ornate, just vaudeville.”⁶⁴⁹

⁶⁴⁹ “Frankie Fay to Headline Himself, Eva Le Galliene, Elsie Janis in Vaudeville,” *New York Herald Tribune*, 17 Feb. 1939, Harvard Theatre Collection, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

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APPENDIX

The 1868 Pastor bill that culminated with “New Tour Around the World,” an afterpiece revolving around an American balloon trip through several European countries, demonstrates the usual range of an evening’s performance:

- Overture, orchestra
- Walk Around Medley (*single female, also appears in afterpiece*)
- Musical Mélange (*single female, also appears in afterpiece*)
- Pas Seul (*single female, also appears in afterpiece*)
- Mr. Frank Dillon, the great London celebrity and master comique of Great Britain, in his original comic sketches -Song and Dance. "Waiting for a Broadway Stage" (*single male, also appears in afterpiece*)
- Grand cannon ball act by the champion of the world, Herr Holton
- Banjo solo and song (*single male, also appears in show*)
- Charming divertissement, A Night In Madrid! (*4 women, also appear in afterpiece*)
- "The Two Johnson", a roaring piece of fun (*three men, also appear in afterpiece*)
- The famous Spanish gymnasts, The Torree Brothers
- Overture, "All Nations," orchestra
- "New Tour Around the World!" (afterpiece)

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